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MORALITY OF FICTION;

OR,

AN INQUIRY

INTO

THE TENDENCY OF FICTITIOUS NARRATIVES,

WITH

OBSERVATIONS ON SOME OF THE MOST EMINENT.

By H. MURRAY,

Author of the 'Swiss Emigrants.'

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ERRATA.

Page 12. *for* he *read* the author.
31. *for* predominant *read* prominent.
105. l. 7. *after* tendency *read* is.
167. l. 3. from bottom *after* ch'alto *read* strepito.
168. *for* it is *read* they are.

INTRODUCTION.

In all stages of human society, from the time at least of its emerging from absolute barbarism, no disposition seems more general than the delight which is taken in works of fiction. These form part, and generally a favourite part, of the literature of every nation. Considering the consummate wisdom which is displayed in every other part of the human constitution, it appears improbable that so universal an inclination should be altogether of a vicious and hurtful nature, or that there should not be some useful purposes which it is destined to serve. What these purposes are, it is the object of the following

essay to inquire; as well as to point out the abuses to which this propensity is liable, and the boundaries within which its gratification ought to be confined.

The subject divides itself naturally into two parts. In the first, I shall endeavour to ascertain the principles on which fiction is to be conducted, in order to give it an useful tendency; and in the second, to examine, according to those principles, some of the most eminent of these works, which have, at different times, been produced.

MORALITY OF FICTION.

PART I.

The kinds of instruction which fiction has been supposed capable of affording seem reducible to three: to communicate a knowledge of human life and manners,—to prove the truth of some philosophical opinion, or the obligation of some moral principle,—and, lastly, to exhibit examples of conduct, superior to those which are to be met with in ordinary life.

To begin then with the first, or with those which aim at giving a faithful representation

of human life and manners. It is no doubt extremely desirable, that an individual should acquire a more extensive acquaintance with mankind than his own personal observation can furnish. This must always be, in a great degree, both limited and precarious. The objects, too, which it presents, will be often viewed through such a mist of passion and prejudice, as to prevent his forming a correct judgment respecting them. Admitting, then, the necessity of some additional information, the question is, in what manner this information may best be communicated? Now, the proper and natural mode seems to be, by a narration of such events as have actually taken place. It is by these alone that the deficiences of personal observation can be completely supplied; and that the philosopher can be enabled to trace those general laws which regulate the course of human affairs. Such being the case, we are naturally led to inquire into the circumstances which have induced men rather, in this view, to have recourse to fiction.

Among narratives founded upon truth,

that which has hitherto attracted by far the greatest share of the attention of mankind, is the history of nations. It is a study, doubtless, of the highest importance. To the practical statesman, as well as to the votary of political science, it opens ample sources of instruction. But there may be room to doubt, whether it be equally adapted to the use of man, considered as a private individual. Even in that view, he may derive from it, no doubt, a knowledge of the elementary principles of human nature. Still the aspect in which it presents men and things, must be very different from that in which he is ever likely to view them. There may even be a danger, lest very great familiarity with these splendid occurrences should withdraw his attention too much from the ordinary concerns of life, and should render him dissatisfied with that more humble station which Providence has assigned him.

There is a material difference, indeed, between the affairs of public and of private life. The former can be known only through the medium of history, while every man, by

means of his own experience, must obtain a considerable acquaintaince with the latter. It were to be wished, however, that he could obtain some portion of it, previous to his entrance upon active life. Experience comes late, and is often too dearly bought. Before acquiring it, he may have committed those errors, and suffered those evils, from which the possession of it would have secured him. Written narratives would form also the best foundation for what may be termed the philosophy of domestic life; a science, which, though yet in its infancy, seems likely to be at least as useful as political philosophy.

But, in stating these defects of historical composition, it is by no means my intention to represent fiction as a very eligible substitute. For the resemblance which it bears to truth can hardly ever be so exact, as that truth itself must not still be preferable. However well executed, it can never be referred to by the moralist, as an authority, on which to establish maxims for the conduct of life. The chief fictitious performances, that have pretensions of this kind, are those which

go by the name of comic romances. Here, the great aim of the writers being to present their characters in a ludicrous and amusing point of view, they are naturally led, instead of a faithful representation of nature, to give very strong caricatures. With the same view of entertaining their readers, they have filled the story with surprising and improbable incidents, such as seldom or never take place in real life. Nor have they scrupled to use other methods still more unwarrantable, which render many of these works by no means serviceable to the cause of morality.

The best method, then, of supplying the deficiencies of history, seems, instead of these works, to be the biography of private life. Here a man may view others acting in the very same circumstances in which he himself, either is, or may be placed. This species of composition is generally objected to, as not capable of exciting a sufficient degree of interest. For this objection, there has hitherto, no doubt, been some ground. So long as this is the case, fiction may, in some degree, though very imperfectly, supply its

place. Of late, however, it seems to have more and more attracted the attention of the public. The chief cause has probably been the great diffusion of literature among the middling, and even the lower classes, of society. This circumstance, according to all appearance, is likely, not only to continue, but to increase; and the taste for this species of biography may be expected to keep pace with it.

We proceed, now, to what may be termed reasoning fictions. These are composed with the view of proving the truth of some proposition, which the author considers as important. This may be either a philosophical opinion, or a moral principle. They may be divided, therefore, into philosophical and moral; on each of which it will be proper to make a few separate observations.

Philosophical romances are a very late invention, and have not been always employed for the best of purposes. Some of the first, indeed, which made their appearance, were written with the view of supporting some very ill-founded and dangerous principles.

It is obvious, however, that this is merely an accidental circumstance; that they might have been employed in support of useful, as well as of pernicious doctrines. Of late, indeed, they have actually been so: several very ingenious works have been produced, with the view of counteracting the bad effects of those above alluded to.* The question is, then, how far this can be considered, in itself, as a proper mode of investigating truth?

The only opinions, it is evident, which can be introduced here, are those of a practical nature; and the object must be, to shew the good or bad effects which these opinions produce, when applied to the conduct of life. To effect this purpose, the leading events in the story must appear to be the immediate and direct consequences of their operation. These events, too, must be strictly conformable to the usual course of nature: every thing unnatural and improbable is to be excluded. Were these rules to be carefully

* See note [A] at the end of the volume.

observed, the attempt might, at first sight, appear not altogether preposterous; and it might be thought, by many readers, to be a very easy and amusing manner of devoting themselves to philosophical inquiry. Yet, there are considerations, which, if duly attended to, will probably lead us to a somewhat different conclusion.

First, then, it tends to form a very pernicious habit, that of resting philosophical opinions upon any foundation, besides that of well ascertained facts. The building upon these, by what is termed the method of induction, is now universally allowed to be the only road which can lead to the discovery of important truth. But no good purpose can be answered by an attempt to draw inferences from imaginary events. Such an attempt is one of the abuses of this kind of writing, which, the reader, instead of being encouraged in, ought to be carefully guarded against.

This objection will apply, even on the supposition of the execution being unexceptionable. But there are several circumstances

which make it improbable that such should ever be the case, and which render this a very unfit mode of carrying on any process of reasoning. A work, where fancy must have such ample scope, can hardly be conducted according to strict logical rules. Nature will seldom be closely followed; and incidents may easily be so arranged as to give them, on a superficial view, the appearance of supporting some favourite tenet. On a closer examination, the leading events will be generally found to have proceeded from foreign and accidental causes, altogether different from those which the point to be proved requires them to have proceeded from. The judgment also is frequently biassed by the author's ascribing every good quality to such personages as are of his own manner of thinking; and, to the opposite party, every thing which can render them the object of ridicule or hatred. With regard to the reader, it cannot be expected that he should be much occupied in following out the train of reasoning. The likelihood is, either that he will pay no attention to the opinions in-

culcated, or, if he does, that he will adopt them implicitly, and without due examination. Pleased with interesting narrative, or brilliant description, he will not be much disposed to search for defects in the argument.

Upon the whole, then, it would appear, that truth is still to be found out, as formerly, by philosophical discussion, by arranging and generalizing facts, not by any fable, however ingenious or well constructed. Perhaps it may be otherwise where opinions are introduced with the view of spreading, and rendering them familiar to the unlearned. Where they happen, indeed, to be of a peculiar and paradoxical nature, this certainly is not the proper place for bringing them forward. But if they be such as are generally agreed upon by well-informed and thinking men, and he himself be satisfied of their truth, there appears to be no impropriety in representing them as believed and acted upon by his favourite characters.

The second order of reasoning fictions, are those, whose object it is to shew the motives of prudence, which bind to the observation

of some particular moral duty. This they generally attempt, by exhibiting the calamities which ill-conduct occasions to the person who is guilty of it. They may also shew the happy effects which virtue produces. But this is more rarely their aim; and, where it is, they coincide, in a great measure, with the class which we are next to notice. Wherever the term moral fiction occurs in the course of the present essay, it is to be understood in this limited sense, not as signifying, in general, works whose tendency is favourable to morality.

Tales, written with a view to instruction, are generally of this kind; insomuch, that when we speak of the moral of a tale, we mean always some maxim which may be inferred from it.

The same objections which were stated under the former head, seem to apply here with nearly equal force. It is only by a review of the actual course of events, that we can trace with certainty that connection, which, even in this world, exists between virtue and happiness. Now, fiction either

does, or does not, represent this course as more favourable to virtue than it really is. On the former supposition, it tends to raise expectations, of which a little acquaintance with the world will quickly shew the fallacy. The disappointment which this occasions, may then, very probably, throw those who have suffered it into an opposite extreme. Should it, on the other hand, give a just view of human affairs, it will still possess no superiority over the narrative of real events.

Besides the objections to which this species is liable in common with the former, there appear to be others peculiar to itself. To fulfil the object in view, it is necessary that the principal character should be not only imperfect, but in a great degree criminal. But a character, that was uniformly and throughout bad, would form an unpleasant, and even a disgusting, object. He must, therefore, be at the same time invested with certain amiable and brilliant qualities, which may render him an object of interest to the reader. Moral turpitude is thus frequently united with those superficial talents and ac-

complishments, which are so dazzling in the eyes of the bulk of mankind. There seems thus to be no small danger, that, by a too natural association of ideas, the one part of this character may be confounded with the other, and the whole be considered as a proper object of imitation. This is particularly apt to be the case in young and unexperienced readers, who must form here a very large proportion. Every one has heard of the young nobleman, who, having witnessed the representation of a play, called the Libertine destroyed, declared, on leaving the house, that he would be the libertine destroyed, and actually proved so.

This objection acquires still greater force, when we consider, that whatever attention may be paid by the author to what is called the moral of his work, he may depend upon its being little, if at all regarded, by the reader. His mind, while perusing it, will probably be quite otherwise occupied, than in considering the maxims of conduct which may be drawn from it. According to the view, indeed, which has been given above,

such a disposition is not only natural, but perfectly reasonable.

It cannot be denied, that, in the conduct of life, most men are disposed, from motives of interest or vanity, to connect themselves with the prosperous, rather than the unfortunate. But, in regard to narratives, whether real or fictitious, where these passions have no room to operate, I conceive the case to be widely different. Here we feel rather a disposition to attach ourselves to the suffering party. Even where his conduct has been deserving of reproach, we consider it as in a great measure expiated by the attendant punishment. But every generous feeling of our nature rises in arms, at the view of triumphant and successful villany. Far from being seduced into any admiration, we feel our detestation of it increased. No object, on the contrary, can be more interesting, than that of a virtuous man, who is bowed beneath the weight of misfortune; and even, though the issue be fatal, our sympathy, far from diminishing, is thereby improved and heightened. What is called poetical justice,

may, I suspect, be required rather for the gratification of the reader's wishes, than for the improvement of his moral feelings. This purpose is to be accomplished by other means, which I shall afterwards endeavour to point out.

Upon the whole, we may perhaps conclude, with regard both to this and to the first-mentioned species of fiction, that every purpose for which they are intended, may be better accomplished by the biography of private life. But, in case the public taste be not sufficiently turned towards this species of reading, these works, provided they keep close to nature and truth, may not be altogether without their use.

We come, now, to that description of fictitious writing, which professes to instruct, by exhibiting examples of conduct, superior to those which are to be met with in ordinary life. And this appears to me to be the purpose for which it is best adapted, and where its place can be completely supplied by no other species of composition. On it, therefore, I

shall treat at somewhat greater length than on the two former.

The slightest observation may be sufficient to convince us, that man is, in many respects, an imitative being. His character, undoubtedly, is very much formed after that of those with whom he becomes acquainted, either by reading, or by the intercourse of life. So strong is this propensity to imitation, that it will take place even in regard to persons whom he views with a good deal of indifference, provided they be continually before his eyes. But the effects must be much more striking, when they are the objects of any peculiar degree of respect and admiration. Such is then the proneness to imitation, that it does not confine itself to those qualities which are really brilliant and estimable; but embraces their most indifferent actions, and even their very defects.

In regard to the choice of associates, this, though a point of the last importance, does not properly belong to the present subject. The question is respecting the comparative merits of real and fictitious history. Now,

though it cannot be denied, that, in the former, we may find persons possessed of great and various excellencies, yet these must always be more or less mixed and imperfect. There is, therefore, the same danger which has been already noticed in a particular species of fictitious composition. The virtues and vices of the character are apt to be confounded together; the one throwing a sort of borrowed lustre over the other. History abounds with examples of men who have been betrayed into follies, and even crimes, by the indiscriminate imitation of some favourite hero. It becomes desirable, therefore, that, by some other means, a higher standard of moral judgment should be previously formed.

It is true, such a standard may, and ought to be, formed, by the deductions of reason, and the precepts of religion. Still it has long been observed, that example possesses some advantages over these; that it makes a livelier impression, and has a more immediate influence on the active propensities of our nature. It is desirable, that not only reason, but imagination and feeling, should be enlisted in the

cause of virtue; that while reason guides our path, fancy should strew it with flowers. It is the office of the one to discover where virtue lies; of the other to adorn, and render her pleasing and attractive.

It has been asserted by an eminent philosopher, that man is formed capable of conceiving perfection, though not of attaining it. Yet even this, perhaps, cannot be assented to, without great reserve. I suspect, that the powers of man are every way limited; that absolute perfection is as much beyond his conception, as his attainment. Certain it is, however, that he can form an idea of it much higher than he is able uniformly to act up to. And though his conduct cannot equal this standard, yet it will generally be found to bear some proportion to it. Hence the importance of raising the standard as high as possible; of exhibiting characters possessed of the most brilliant virtue, and purified as much as possible from every stain of imperfection. *

The degree, in which a writer will succeed

* See note [B] at the end of the volume.

in these representations must depend both on his own genius and on the refinement which has taken place in the moral taste of the age. If duly qualified, however, for the task he has undertaken, he can seldom fail of drawing models of conduct higher than can be found in the life of any of his contemporaries: and this seems to be all that is required.

Such, then, it would appear, are the advantages which may arise from works formed upon this plan, provided they be properly conducted, and not indulged in to excess. Many persons, however, have been of a different opinion; and have condemned all attempts to exhibit characters which rise in any degree above common life. It may be proper to consider some of the arguments which have been advanced in support of this opinion.

Some have thought it sufficient to observe, that no such characters were to be found in real life; that they were 'faultless monsters, which the world ne'er saw.' This argument is evidently founded upon the idea, that the

proper office of fiction is to give a faithful representation of human life; an idea which I have examined at length, in a former part of the work. I shall only observe in addition, that, upon this supposition, the art of writing would be placed on a footing inferior to those of painting and statuary. We never reproach the painter for assembling, in one, the beauties of different landscapes; nor the sculptor for drawing finer forms than were ever moulded by the hand of nature. The mere copying of real objects is obviously an inferior department of these arts; while the other is that which has been always occupied by the great masters. But, if external forms may thus be embellished at pleasure, shall the painter of mind alone be reduced to the rank of a mere imitator? One striking difference which exists between them, is completely in favour of the latter. The former are merely objects of taste, and have obviously no tendency to produce any improvement on the form of the spectator. But, in the case of moral painting, a man both possesses a power, and naturally feels an impulse, to form himself to

some resemblance of the object which he admires.

It has been objected also, that such characters are not capable of being rendered very interesting. There is certainly ground for this objection, in regard to some of those which have been drawn even by writers of genius. The art of drawing imaginary perfect characters, like every other art, must be progressive: and though many faults may be discovered in a few of the first, this affords no sufficient presumption against future attempts being attended with greater success. Two causes seem to have been chiefly instrumental in occasioning the defect here complained of. Writers have often considered perfection too much as a negative quality. They have been more anxious to render their heroes free from blame, than distinguished for active and virtuous exertion. Now, negative virtue is no doubt of great importance in itself. As, however, it leaves the character very incomplete, so, in narrative, the figure it makes is particularly insipid.

Another cause may be, that this perfect

character has been represented as too entirely governed by reason. That faculty has been made, not merely as it ought to be, the ruling, but the sole, principle of action; to the entire exclusion of imagination and feeling. This, as man is now constituted, cannot be considered as forming the perfection of his nature; and, in a work of this kind, it must be peculiarly ill calculated for interesting and affecting the reader. But, where the different faculties preserve their due proportions, and the situations are such, as to give them full opportunity of displaying themselves, I cannot think that, to persons of just taste, the character would appear insipid or uninteresting.

It might tend to obviate any danger of this kind, if, while the hero is not deficient in any good quality, he should possess some one in a peculiar and eminent degree. The virtue chosen for this purpose should be such as his circumstances and situation more particularly call for.

The next objection is, that characters raised very much above the ordinary level are

apt to produce despair, rather than emulation. Here we may observe, that it is neither to be expected, nor perhaps to be wished, that any one should study such a work with the express view of making his conduct coincide, in every respect, with that of its hero. A tame and pedantic character would be the natural result of such a servile imitation. It is sufficient, that he should regard his conduct with high sentiments of interest and admiration, should enter into the views by which he is guided, and be formed insensibly to the same mode of thinking and acting. Besides, we never think of requiring the moralist to bring down his instructions to the level of ordinary practice. Men must always be expected to fall somewhat short of the standard they have formed to themselves. The great danger, then is, of that standard being too low, not of its being too high. Even if some little abatement be thought necessary, it ought to be general, and to run through the whole character. To represent a striking failure in some particular virtue, is productive of bad effects which have been

repeatedly pointed out. If, however, according to the opinion expressed above, even the delineating of absolute perfection be beyond our reach, there will be the less occasion for any intentional debasement.

No doubt, the perfection here delineated ought not to be of a romantic and visionary nature. It must be adapted to the actual condition of human life, and such as, in its own nature, is capable of being reduced to practice. It ought to be suited, also, to the state of society at the time, not to another, though perhaps a happier and better state.

There is another observation, made by highly respectable writers, and drawn from very profound views of human nature. Passive impressions grow fainter by repetition, until, at length, they almost cease to be felt. But, unless an opportunity be given of displaying themselves in action, there is no room for the formation of habits, which can alone constitute a virtuous character. No such opportunity is here afforded; and thus, say these reasoners, the emotions, which will never again recur with equal force, are wast-

ed without producing any lasting or beneficial consequences.

Now, it is, in the first place, to be observed, that fiction is here precisely on the same footing with any other kind of instruction, conveyed either by books or public discourses. In these, there is no means supplied of putting the precepts inculcated into immediate practice; yet daily experience proves them, on the whole, to be extremely useful. There seems no reason why the same observation should not apply to the case we are considering. An habitual disposition to act conformably to the examples held forth, will probably be formed, and be ready to manifest itself at the first favourable opportunity. Like other habits, it may continue to gain strength, after the liveliness of the first impression has subsided. It will seldom be advisable to delay instilling virtuous propensities, till the very moment when their operation is required. They will then, probably, find little leisure for their reception, and will be counteracted by a variety of opposite temptations.

At the same time, I am perfectly sensible, that the observation above mentioned is far from being altogether void of foundation. It is certainly desirable, that virtuous dispositions, and the active exertions to which they prompt, should not be separated by a very long interval. This circumstance, however, is obviously beyond the controul of an author, or public instructor. The care of it must rest with the individual himself, and more particularly with those who have the direction of his studies and pursuits. One particular, that deserves to be attended to in this view, shall be mentioned in the sequel of the present essay.

Such, then, appears to be the purpose which fiction is best calculated to answer. The next object is, to ascertain the manner in which it is to be conducted, in order to become most conducive to this purpose. On considering this subject, some questions naturally arise, which I shall now proceed to examine in their order.

And, first,—Is this perfection to be bestowed alike, on all the characters that are

introduced into the story. Shall the reader be transported entirely into a new world, from which every thing coarse and turbulent is excluded. This appears to be attended with many dangers, and to be little likely even to accomplish the end at which it aims. The natural effect will be, to lead a man to look for perfection in all those whom he meets, or at least forms any intimate connection with. But, however desirable it may be that he should employ a high standard in judging of his own conduct, it is by no means equally so, that he should apply a similar standard to that of his neighbours. Here he is in general disposed to be sufficiently rigid. Candour and moderation, as they are strongly called for by the weakness of our nature, so they are the virtues in which there is the greatest temptation to fail. Too high expectations from our fellow-men, necessarily lead to a disappointment, which is extremely apt to terminate in discontent and misanthropy; dispositions than which none can be more fatal, either to our own happiness, or that of those with whom we are connected.

Works, conducted on this plan, besides being attended with these bad effects, would be ill calculated even for attaining the object in view. The nature of our duties must vary extremely, according to the character of those with whom we live and act. The same line of conduct, which would be proper in a society of beings thus divested of human imperfection, would lead to the greatest errors, if adopted in our intercourse with men such as they really exist. Imprudence, at least, if not something worse, must be the inevitable consequence of such a delusion. The only good effect which can be produced, is, in regard to those whose superior knowledge and opportunities afford them the means of influencing and guiding the conduct of others. This is, no doubt, an important branch of active benevolence, and one which the author of such a work may, with propriety, endeavour to inculcate on his readers. But the improvement produced should appear to be in consequence of efforts made for that purpose, not as existing independently of them.

What then are the characters to whom this

superior excellence is to be ascribed? They are the leading characters, those in whom the reader takes the deepest interest, and with whom he feels disposed, as it were, to identify himself. Their number ought certainly to be very small; nay, I doubt, if in its highest degree, this quality should be bestowed on more than one. The rest may be mixed and imperfect characters, with gradations of good and evil, such as actually take place in real life. There may be a propriety, indeed, in drawing a somewhat stronger line between the two, in exhibiting virtue in all her lustre, and vice in all her deformity; and, where the latter predominates, in not veiling her turpitude, by any large proportion of good qualities. This, however, need take place only in the case of a few of the most predominant actors; while the rest, forming the greater number, may be placed on a level with the generality of mankind.

A distinction is also to be made between those associates whom the hero has chosen for himself, and those among whom he is thrown by unavoidable accident. The for-

ner, without being absolutely free from faults, ought yet to possess such a degree of merit, as to render them worthy of his choice. The latter can with no propriety be raised above the ordinary standard.

Our next question relates to the degree in which this favourite character is to be endued with the gifts of nature and fortune. And here a considerable embarrassment arises. For, on the one hand, his merit ought to be as much as possible intrinsic, and independent of outward circumstances. At the same time, to make him strikingly deficient in qualifications which command so much of the admiration of mankind, would lower his character in the eyes of most readers, and would tend to throw contempt even on those moral qualities, which are held forth as objects of imitation. Between these opposite dangers, it will not be easy for the writer to conduct himself so as not to fall into one or other of them. His plan, as I conceive, must vary according to the different nature of these advantages. Most of them may be comprehended under these three: external

appearance; intellectual endowments; rank and fortune.

The first of these, the writers of fiction have lavished on their favourites with an unsparing hand. The possession of these in the most superlative degree, seems to be now considered as an indispensible requisite. This is, indeed, a very obvious and natural way of gaining them the good-will of the reader. Yet, considered in the view of its tendency, it would be difficult to discover any good effects that are likely to result from it. One thing is evident, that the greatest admiration which any one can feel for this quality, will have no tendency to increase it in himself, or to form him to any resemblance of the person whom he admires. More important consequences may indeed arise from the desire of meeting with it in another: but it does not follow that they are more advantageous. The practice of forming connections for life, with peculiar regard to this circumstance, is, perhaps, not one which a wise man would wish very much to encourage. Yet, to represent a great deficiency

in this particular would be whimsical, and could not fail to inspire a degree of disgust. Perhaps, therefore, it may be most advisable to pass over the subject in silence, and to turn the attention of the reader towards more valuable and lasting qualities. Nor will this deprive the narrative of any great ornament. The ideas of beauty, which description attempts to convey, are always extremely faint and inadequate.

If any exception be made to this rule, it must be with regard to that higher species of beauty, which consists in expression. As this generally accompanies the possession of valuable mental qualities, it may be considered as, in some degree, susceptible of improvement.

In regard to intellectual endowments, the case seems to be rather different. These are not of a nature to be passed over, nor can they be made wanting without lowering the character in the greatest degree. A weak and foolish good man could extort no approbation that was not mingled with contempt. He could never, at least, excite any of those

sentiments which lead to imitation. Besides, as this is, in a great degree, an acquired excellence, it is proper that the reader should be prompted to use every means of improving it in himself. With this view, these attainments should appear, in a great measure, to arise rather from well directed cultivation, than from the mere strength of natural parts. The same observations will apply, more or less, to every other kind of mental accomplishment.

There remain only the goods of fortune to be considered. And though these are not to be treated with any undue contempt, yet, certainly, both his dignity and his happiness, ought to be represented as alike independent of them. However well qualified to discharge, with ability, the duties of the highest and most important situations, he should also be able to enjoy himself, and to act with respectability and usefulness, in a more moderate and humble sphere. He ought also to appear supporting with fortitude, and rising superior to, the greatest adversity. It will be proper, therefore, that,

in the course of the work, he should experience various vicissitudes of fortune, which may afford an opportunity of practising those virtues that arise naturally out of every situation.

Who is to appear as the relator of the story? the leading character, or the author himself? For the purpose which we have at present in view, I am rather disposed to prefer the former. A more intimate connection is thus formed between him and the reader; the latter imbibes not only a disposition to imitate the actions described, but the very spirit from which they proceed. There seems a danger that the other mode may produce an emulation tinctured with vanity; rather a wish to have the same things told of us, than a disposition to do them. Perhaps, also, there is thus less danger of a perfect character becoming uninteresting. When a person is introduced to tell his own story, we naturally find it agreeable when his actions are deserving of approbation, and painful when it is otherwise.

This mode of narration may be performed,

either by letters, or by an uniform unbroken narrative. Where it is to be short, the latter seems advisable, as more distinct and concise, and keeping the attention fixed upon one object. In a work of great extent, however, the uniformity of such a plan would prove somewhat tiresome; and letters, admitting of greater variety, are rather to be preferred.

Is the object in question to be best attained by poetical, or by prose, fictions? In my opinion, by the latter. Poetry is certainly an elegant and charming amusement. By inspiring a taste for the beauties of nature, by giving dignity to the character, and raising its votary above mean and degrading pleasures, it may even become subservient to important purposes of improvement. But, for influencing the active principles, for guiding our conduct in the ordinary affairs of life, it does not seem so very well fitted. It transports the reader into a higher world, into scenes which cannot, indeed, be viewed without admiration, but which bear little resemblance to those in which he is destined

to act. He will be apt to regard them as things belonging to another world, and with which he has no practical concern. It might be otherwise in the early ages of society, during that warlike and adventurous period, when fables the most extravagant were easily credited, and when the common events of life were susceptible of poetical embellishment. To describe these events now in the same manner would, I suspect, have rather a burlesque than a pleasing effect.

In the case of political and historical fictions, it may be inquired, whether they ought to be altogether imaginary, or founded in part upon real events. The last method may certainly assist that impression of reality, which is so necessary in order to give interest to the narrative. Yet there are circumstances, which may, perhaps, be found to overbalance this advantage. It must prove a severe restraint on the fancy of the writer, who will often find it no easy task to prevent his story from clashing with the history or tradition on which it is founded. The engrafted fiction also tends to give false

impressions in regard to the history. Sometimes even, as will appear in the sequel, it throws over it an obscurity which is never removed. It seems, therefore, to be for the mutual advantage both of truth and fiction, that they should be kept altogether distinct; or, if a foundation must be laid in some real events, that they should be as few, and as remote, as possible, in point of time and place.

Is it proper, that narratives formed with this design should be crowded with surprising and improbable incidents. This has been long assumed by the writers of fiction as an indisputable privilege. Events, that in real life appear altogether incredible, are there quite in the common order of things. To conduct their hero through all the mazes of adventure; to involve him in difficulties apparently inextricable; to keep the reader perpetually on the rack of suspense and anxiety, are, in general, the objects chiefly aimed at by the authors of such performances. The more improbable an incident is, the more unlike common life, the better is it

supposed fitted for their purpose. The origin of this mode of writing is easily accounted for. The invention of printing, and consequent diffusion of books, has given birth to a multitude of readers, who seek only for amusement, and wish to find it without trouble or thought. Works thus conducted, supply them with one which is level to the lowest capacities. How well they are adapted to the taste of this description of readers appears plainly from the extraordinary avidity with which they are devoured.

No good effect seems likely to result from such a kind of reading besides the mere childish pleasure it affords. It tends to give false views of human life; to inspire fantastic and visionary expectations; discontent with the uniformity of common life; and a disposition to choose the plan of conduct which leads to extraordinary adventures, rather than that which true wisdom points out. A crowd of incidents will leave little room for the display of character and sentiment, or any higher beauties, of which this kind of

writing is susceptible. Even supposing them to exist there, the attention of the reader is likely to be too much occupied to admit of his receiving from them any deep impression.

It is true, among probable events, the writer must make a selection of those which possess the requisite degree of dignity and interest. Not that he ought to confine himself entirely to such as are great and striking. It must often be his object to embellish, and render interesting, the most simple scenes of ordinary life.

Unity also has been regarded by the most distinguished critics as essential to every work of invention. One action must run through the whole, to which all the rest are subordinate. The advantage of this is not to be denied; though I hardly think it entitled to hold the first rank among the merits of these compositions.

Nor is that pleasure to be altogether neglected, which arises from exciting and gratifying the reader's curiosity. We must only take care not to make it interfere with

those of an higher order, nor to sacrifice to it, in any considerable degree, probability or the truth of nature.

Having examined these questions regarding the manner in which narratives written with this design ought to be conducted, it may be proper to say a few words on the preparation which is requisite for the author before engaging in them. And here there seems to be a difference between this and the generality of other literary pursuits. In these the writer ought to devote himself chiefly to the attentive study of those who have preceded him in the same path. But this does not appear to me to take place with regard to fiction. When founded upon the observation of real events, it may, if used with moderation, be a salutary mental food; but not, I suspect, when founded upon other fictions. The merit of a man's conduct must depend upon its being adapted to his real circumstances. It is by considering these, that his duties are to be ascertained; nor could it be of much use to represent any one acting with the most perfect propriety in si-

tuations altogether imaginary. The knowledge of real life, therefore, derived from observation, and from history and biography, forms the best foundation for success to the writer of fiction. It is by selecting whatever is most excellent in real characters, by purifying and refining it from every kind of alloy, that he is to form his portrait of ideal perfection. Besides, though the communicating a knowledge of human life and manners be not, as I have endeavoured to shew, the end at which he is principally to aim, yet it is desirable, that he should, as little as possible, convey any erroneous ideas respecting it.

The science of morals he ought to be well acquainted with, both on his own account, and with the view of regulating more correctly the conduct of his hero. Religion, as it is in itself an object of the highest interest, so the opportunities, which he may have of bringing it forward in the course of the narrative, impose on him an additional obligation to employ every means of forming just views in regard to it.

Certainly, in the general plan and nature of the work, a sacred regard is to be paid to the improvement of his readers. Yet it may be proper to warn him against making that regard too scrupulous and minute. Fancy must have ample range. He must become present at every scene which he describes, must enter into all the views and sentiments of the actors, must make them, as it were, his own. His mind must therefore, as much as possible, be free from any kind of restraint. Besides, the reader might be apt to revolt against his appearing as a dictator in matters of conduct. That instruction is likely to be most effectual which appears to be undesigned, and to flow from the natural impulse of taste and feeling. The most desirable object for him, therefore, would be, to form his mind to such a tone, as that it might produce spontaneously, and without effort, a work calculated to accomplish the end at which he aims.

Having done with the authors, it may be proper to say a few words to the readers of such productions. And first, it must not be

imagined, that, in thus considering fiction as capable of answering some important purposes, it is by any means understood, that it should supersede the study of real events. The latter ought certainly to form a much greater proportion of our reading than the former. It is only by an extensive survey of these, that either a correct knowledge of human nature can be attained, or comprehensive views formed, respecting the course of human affairs. A few partial and detached facts might tend rather to mislead than to inform. But, in regard to characters exhibited as models for imitation, a much smaller number may be perfectly sufficient. Excessive indulgence in this kind of reading, tends, indeed, to counteract its effects, by deadening those sentiments of interest and admiration which it at first excited. In consequence of impressions being made too often, the mind becomes gradually callous to them. There are none, perhaps, who discover in their conduct less, both of the good and bad effects which fiction produces, than those who make it their daily food. It seems to occasion,

then only a lamentable waste of time and corruption of taste.

It follows, as a natural consequence, from the above observation, that there is no kind of reading in which a nicer selection is to be made. The doom, so justly denounced by Horace against poetical mediocrity, seems to be here equally well merited. He who wishes to inquire after important facts, must often content himself with a very dry account of them. In works of reasoning, too, stile is but a secondary consideration. But works of fancy, which are not well executed, seem to have no claim whatever on the public attention. I am aware, that the general practice is very different, and that there is no department of literature, in which the public are willing to put up with such paltry performances The cause undoubtedly is, that they are resorted to as an amusement by a multitude of persons devoid of taste, and who cannot submit to the labour of thinking. The rule, however, does not the less hold good in regard to those whose minds are better cultivated, and whose time

is too valuable to be wasted on productions altogether insignificant.

It is an important inquiry, at what age the perusal of these works may be made with the greatest advantage. This will probably appear to be that which immediately precedes and follows the entrance upon active life. Then it is that those habits are formed which generally continue through life without any great variation. Impressions made at an earlier period would be, in a great measure, effaced by the more interesting objects which then present themselves. At an after period they would come too late. These remarks, however, by no means apply to fiction in general, but only to that which is successfully conducted on the principles above explained. This is the time of life, when every thing of doubtful or dangerous tendency is to be most carefully avoided; and, if read at all, to be reserved until the attainment of a more advanced age and greater maturity of judgment.

PART II.

HAVING thus endeavoured to discover the ends which may be answered by fiction, and the manner in which it is to be conducted, in order to accomplish those ends, I shall now make a few remarks on such works of this kind as have attracted the greatest share of the attention of mankind. Considering these chiefly in the view of their tendency, I shall offer, at the same time, occasional remarks on their merit as literary productions.

Fictions may be divided into narrative and dramatic. Although many parts of the above inquiry will apply equally to both, yet it was composed chiefly with a view to the former. To these I now mean to confine myself entirely.

Fictitious narrative may be written either in poetry or prose. Allowing the superiority of the former in several respects, there have yet appeared reasons for thinking, that the

latter may be more efficacious in a practical point of view. As epic poems, however, may also be considered in this light, I shall begin with noticing a few of the most eminent.

HOMER.

Homer has long been universally regarded, at once as the father and the prince of epic poetry. In force of genius, and variety of invention, he has scarcely been equalled, and certainly never surpassed. It would be improper, however, to consider his productions as altogether fictitious. Poetry is the history of early ages. It is then the only mode of transmitting to posterity the deeds of those who have distinguished themselves by their wisdom or valour. Many causes, however, concur in altering its truth, and blending it with a large proportion of fiction. Among these we may mention the slender means which the narrator possesses of ascertaining facts, the desire he feels of embellishing his poem, with the love of the marvel-

lous, and implicit credulity which he is sure to find in his hearers. He will often, also, be actuated by a wish to raise the character of his native country, and of some patron, perhaps, by whom he is honoured and protected. In general, therefore, only the outline of the story is true, and the rest either entirely produced, or, at least, greatly altered and embellished, by the poet's invention.

There seems to be little doubt of these remarks applying, in all their extent, to the writings of Homer. We have every reason, indeed, to think, both that the war of Troy was undertaken and carried on for many years by the combined forces of Greece, and that the armies on both sides were commanded by chiefs bearing the same names with the heroes of the Iliad. Many minute incidents also may, in all likelihood, have been handed down by tradition, and woven into the story. But, as we have no standard by which to distinguish these from the others which were of the poet's own invention, the whole must remain enveloped in the cloud of obscurity.

But though Homer does not, strictly speaking, deserve much credit as a historian, yet, in a department nearly allied to it, his merits must be fully admitted. He has painted to the life, the manners of that rude and barbarous age in which he lived. This is a circumstance, which, independent of their poetical merit, must render his works extremely valuable. They answer in so far to the first species of fiction above enumerated. According to the view, indeed, which is there given, fiction cannot be considered as the best mode of communicating such information. In the absence, however, of authentic narrative, it may with propriety be resorted to. Now, we have no other records of that age, nor perhaps of any state of society exactly resembling it. While, therefore, these productions derive their chief interest from their poetical merit, they are very important also in an historical point of view.

The Iliad has been often considered as a moral poem, designed to illustrate the bad effects of immoderate anger. Nay, some

critics of considerable eminence have gone so far as to suppose this to be the first and great aim of the author in writing it. This, however, is now generally rejected as an absurd and unnatural supposition. And I doubt if there be any passage from which it can be inferred, that Homer ever thought of his poem in that light. He states, indeed, the anger of Achilles as the subject of the Iliad, but gives no hint of any lessons to be drawn from it. His only reflection is, ' Διος δ' ετελειετο βουλη; the will of Jove was performed.' On a closer examination, indeed, we shall find it to be for the honour of Homer, that he should not be suspected of any such intention. Supposing him to have entertained it, nothing can be imagined more unskilfully executed. All the calamities occasioned by the anger of Achilles fall upon others, and none upon himself; nay, it seems to have rendered his character more conspicuous than ever. This is evidently the direct reverse of what was required, in order to give a moral to the poem.

As little does Homer appear to have aimed

at exhibiting a model of perfect virtue in the character of his hero. If he displays some good qualities, as courage, generosity, and the enthusiasm of friendship, he presents, at the same time, a complete picture of ungovernable passion and brutal ferocity. Indeed, it is remarkable, that, notwithstanding the visible partiality of Homer for his own countrymen, he has placed the superiority, in point of humanity, and even of true magnanimity, decidedly on the opposite side. Possibly, in this, he did no more than follow the truth of history; and the Trojans, situated in a more fertile climate, may have attained, at that time, to a higher degree of civilization and refinement than their Grecian neighbours.

The Odyssey is a less sublime, less poetical, performance than the Iliad, but is perhaps more pleasing and instructive. It gives a more various and intimate view of the manners of the age; and, though Ulysses cannot be considered as a faultless model, he certainly approaches much nearer to it than the hero of the Iliad.

VIRGIL.

From the writings of Homer, we now turn to those of his illustrious rival. The Æneid was not, like the Iliad and Odyssey, produced in a barbarous age, but in one of high comparative civilization and refinement. Before making any direct observations upon this poem, it may be proper to consider some circumstances of the times in which it was produced.

Letters, at Rome, were not of native growth. That city, become the mistress of the world, and drawing from every different province the luxuries it afforded, imported from Greece the elegant luxuries of science and literature. Hence her greatest poets are to be considered as imitators of Grecian models. They were not, however, tame or slavish imitators. Though frequently bringing forward the same ideas, they express them in a manner peculiar to themselves. If they yield to their masters in invention, in simplicity, in fancy, they surpass them in dignity and correctness.

These observations apply, in a peculiar manner, to the Æneid. Perhaps no work ever united such exalted genius, with so small a portion of originality. Virgil seems to have aimed at transfusing into his own language the beauties of Homer, separated from his faults; and he has in part succeeded. He has retrenched his languors, his repetitions, his tiresome digressions; and, to his lofty and irregular flights, has substituted an uniform and well supported majesty. It cannot be said, that he has discovered stronger pathetic powers; but he has certainly exerted them much oftener.

In regard to manners, the Æneid is far from being of equal value. Virgil was naturally disposed, by historical truth, as well as by his devotion to Homer, to make these the same as in the Iliad and Odyssey. But, to the polished age for which he wrote, the coarseness and ferocity of those times would have been extremely disgusting. These, therefore, he was frequently obliged to soften; so that his work exhibits not the manners of any one age, but of several blended together.

In general, his representations are not copied, either from personal observation, or from any source of information, of which we are not equally possessed. In an historical view, therefore, the Æneid has little or no claim to regard. Its interest must rest entirely on its poetical merit; which forms, it must be owned, a very ample foundation.

The critics have been at great pains to extract a moral out of Virgil as well as Homer; not, in my opinion, with much better success. That which they have fixed upon, so far as I recollect, is the beneficial effects of piety to the gods. But, unless from his own frequent declarations, we could hardly discover Æneas to possess this virtue in any peculiar degree. Nor does it appear to have contributed much to the advancement of his fortunes. The favour which he enjoyed above, is evidently owing chiefly to his high extraction; and the protection of Jupiter granted, not to his own merit, but to the beauty and tears of a favourite daughter. Upon the whole, we may safely conclude, that both Homer and Virgil had this object

very little, if at all, in view. This, indeed, if the observations formerly made on that subject be just, can hardly be considered as a blemish in their writings.

But if Virgil has advanced no claim to merit in these two respects, he has aimed at making his poem answer the third description of fictitious productions. Æneas was evidently designed for a perfect character. The view of the poet in this was, perhaps, not so much to promote the moral improvement of his readers, as to give an additional ornament to his poem. Whatever it was, it has been by no means successful. He seems to have considered perfection too much as a negative quality, and as connected with an insensible and unimpassioned turn of mind. Did virtue consist merely in doing no harm, Æneas might have some claim to it. In so far as it requires just feeling and active exertion, he does not seem to have very much. The drawing of characters, indeed, is generally allowed to be the point in which Virgil has most completely failed. Considering the high powers which, in other respects, he has displayed, we can hardly

suppose this to have proceeded from want of genius. Perhaps the same circumstances which have been noticed as affecting the manners of the poem, may have operated here also. Virgil copied not from nature, but from Homer. The characters, however, of that writer would have ill suited the refined taste which prevailed in his time. He preserved, therefore, the mere skeleton of Homer's characters, without any attempt at filling it up. This is extremely apt to be the case, where fiction is built, in this manner, upon other fictions. The filial piety, however, of Æneas, forms one trait, which relieves a little the insipid uniformity of his character.

One circumstance, both in Homer and Virgil, which seems deserving of notice, is the frequent introduction of supernatural beings in a visible and bodily form. There is no action of any importance in which these do not perform a conspicuous part. Their favour seems to be regarded as an higher distinction than any personal merit whatever *.

* See Note [C] at the end of the volume.

Into this Homer was naturally led by the spirit of the times, which regarded these appearances as no way uncommon or unnatural. Virgil has here, as in many other particulars, trod in the footsteps of Homer. I cannot agree with Lord Kaimes, in looking upon this circumstance as a blemish; since it has given occasion to the most sublime passages which occur in both of these poets.* But if it has improved them in a poetical, it certainly has not in a moral, point of view. The divine personages are still less fit than the human, to be held up as models for imitation. They seem, indeed, to consider their Deity as absolving them from every moral obligation, and as a licence to commit, without blame, every species of enormity.

MILTON.

The Paradise Lost differs from both these poems in one respect; that whereas supernatural beings are there only occasional and

* Il. I, 528, 530. XIII, 15, 30. XX, 56, 65. Virg. Geor. I, 328, 332. Æn. VIII, 698, 706.

auxiliary, they are here the leading and principal agents. This circumstance has probably, not a little, contributed to make sublimity so strongly the characteristic of Milton's genius. At the same time, it renders his poem not very well fitted for conveying any practical impression. So far, however, as human beings are introduced, his subject not only admitted of, but required, the representation of perfect characters; and this he has performed in a manner which must charm every reader of taste. He was necessarily confined, indeed, to a very narrow sphere. The only virtues which our first parents could have an opportunity of practising were piety and conjugal affection; of which last, in particular, Milton has given the finest picture imaginable.

OSSIAN.

Most of the other epic poems have been formed, with a few variations, after the model of Homer and Virgil. Those of Ossian must be excepted; productions highly in-

teresting, both in a poetical, and in an historical, point of view. Much controversy has been maintained respecting their authenticity. As poetry, they are equally charming, whatever opinion we may adopt on this subject. When considered, however, as throwing light upon the history of manners, it becomes very important to ascertain how far they are really the production of the age to which they are ascribed. It seems now to be generally admitted, that some originals exist, but that they have received many additions and embellishments from the hand of the translator. In consequence of late inquiries, there appears to be a fair prospect of this much contested point being brought to a satisfactory issue. Such being the case, any farther observations on the subject would at present be premature.

Epic poety has, for a long time past, been much on the decline. If some not unsuccessful attempts have of late been made to revive it, this, I think, may be imputed rather to imitation, and a taste for novelty, than to its being really adapted to the spirit of the

times. I know not if this decline be a circumstance much to be regretted. War and battles, the favourite employment of rude nations, form its chief theme, and the only one, perhaps, for which it is perfectly adapted. But, unless in particular circumstances, the spirit which these breathe, is not that which it is most desirable to cultivate. The masterpieces which have been already produced, may be sufficient to gratify our taste for this species of poetry; and the attention of mankind may now be turned, with advantage, towards more pacific and useful achievements.

XENOPHON.

The first work of fiction (of any length at least), which we find written in prose, is the Cyropædia of Xenophon. It is the first also, that appears to have been composed with a view to instruction. It belongs to the third description of fictitious narratives, which has been noticed as by far the most effectual for this purpose. Its object is to

exhibit a perfect model of what a sovereign prince ought to be, and of the conduct which he ought to follow, both in peace and war. The author was, perhaps, the most amiable and accomplished character of his age. Deeply impressed with that pure and sublime morality, which was taught in the school of Socrates and Plato; distinguished both as a statesman and commander; and having, in the latter capacity, rendered the most important services to his country; he was, doubtless, every way qualified for such an undertaking. It has, accordingly, been universally regarded as one of the most elegant, pleasing, and instructive works that have ever appeared.

It is not to be regarded, however, as a work of mere fiction. The outlines of the story were undoubtedly true, as well as all those facts which were not inconsistent with the author's design. But there may be great reason to doubt, if the character of the real Cyrus bore much resemblance to that of Xenophon's hero. It is hardly consistent with the general tenor of history, to sup-

pose, that any one in his circumstances should be much distinguished for the virtues of mildness and humanity. I am afraid, that the view which Herodotus gives of him, though less agreeable, is more conformable to truth. At least this part therefore, of the Cyropædia, may, in all probability, be considered as fictitious.

The style is distinguished by that manly simplicity, which commonly appears in the writings of men of business, who are more intent upon things, than on the mode of expressing them. It has more elegance and sweetness, however, than such writers generally possess. Throughout the whole is visible an anxiety to communicate instruction, and to bring it down to the level of the meanest capacities. Xenophon has also followed very much that familiar and colloquial style, of which the example had been set by his illustrious master.

Notwithstanding, however, the great excellence of this performance, it must be owned to be less susceptible than formerly of application to practice. This has been

owing chiefly to the great change which has taken place in the manners and political state of society. It is written, too, chiefly with a view to warfare and conquest. That part which relates to the arts of peace, is both shorter, and, in my opinion, of less value. Bad effects have also arisen from the blending of truth with fiction, and our having no means of distinguishing the one from the other. Hence we are left very much in the dark with regard to an important part of history, on which he could probably have given very correct information.

ROMANCES OF CHIVALRY.

From the time of Xenophon, during a long series of ages, no other composition of this kind occurs, till we come to the romances of chivalry. In order to estimate duly the nature of these performances, it may be proper to take a short view of those circumstances in the state of society which gave rise to them. Europe, during the dark ages, was divided into an immense number of little

principalities; in each of which, some chieftain or baron held an absolute, and almost independent sway. The barbarity of those times gives reason to suspect, that many acts of violence would be committed by these nobles, both on those who were under their jurisdiction, and on their immediate neighbours. These, it is probable, were for a long time carried on with impunity. As soon, however, as the first rays of light began to dawn, and to introduce ideas of justice and humanity, the more virtuous and better instructed part of the society became shocked at these outrages. They were naturally prompted, by the warlike spirit which then prevailed, to undertake the task of redressing and punishing them. The reputation which the knight derived from the first achievements, would lead him to embrace every opportunity of repeating them; and even, when none occurred at home, to sally forth in quest of similar adventures. They would thus become, in time, his favourite and almost constant employment.

This disposition is not confined altogether

to the period we are speaking of. The knights errant of modern times correspond with the Hercules and Theseus, the heroes and demigods of Greece. Perhaps, if we were better acquainted with the early history of other nations, we might be able to trace in them the operation of similar principles. There is, however, a very great difference observable between the effects of this disposition in Greece, and in modern Europe. In the former it appears only in a few detached individuals; while, in the latter, it was gradually formed into a regular and splendid system. This may probably be ascribed to the great number of nobility, who, in every part of Europe, were devoted to the profession of arms. Of these chivalry offered a tempting path to all such as were animated by the spirit of enterprise, or the desire of distinction.

As glory was a leading motive in these exploits, it was natural to wish for some means of recording them. An abundance of narratives were accordingly written, and were probably one great means of kindling

and keeping alive the spirit of chivalry. These were partly in poetry, and partly in prose; of which the first were probably the most ancient; the latter are superior in merit, and gave a juster view of the manners of the times. Like the poems of Homer, they had all some truth for their foundation. But the same causes which rendered his so replete with fiction, took place here in a still greater degree. Little or no intercourse was maintained between the different states: the adventurer, therefore, on his return from distant countries, found it easy to impose the most improbable tales on his credulous and admiring friends. The poets, and romance writers, to whom the care of recording his actions was entrusted, were generally inmates of his family, and fed by his bounty; so that they were no way disposed to be sparing of their flattery.

The establishment of christianity formed a bar against the introduction of the heathen mythology. Yet supernatural beings of some kind were necessary as an embellishment, and in accommodation to the super-

stitious spirit of the age. The place of the ancient deities was supplied by giants and enchanters, beings generally of a hostile and malignant nature. It was obviously the interest of the warrior to represent his enemies in this light, which at once increased the glory of victory, and diminished the shame of defeat.

These works possess an honourable distinction over Homer, in the higher spirit of morality which they breathe. The true knight was brave, gentle, courteous, incapable of any thing base or dishonourable; ever ready to undertake the cause of those who were suffering under tyranny and injustice. Chastity also, or, at least, constancy to one object, though not perhaps very generally practised, was requisite for attaining the highest honours of knighthood. Most of these qualities were, in a manner, implied by the nature of their profession, which was entered upon for the purpose of punishing the guilty, and relieving the oppressed. Probably, also, notwithstanding the very corrupted state of religion during

those ages, some portion of them was owing to the influence of christian morality. The church of Rome had, it is true, invented various pernicious modes of eluding its obligation. Still she was careful not to lose sight of it altogether. Her wealth and influence arose chiefly from indulgences, penances, and atonements, which could not have been productive, without a consciousness of guilt on the part of her votaries. It was her interest, therefore, to keep in view some of the leading principles of morality; nor was she disposed, as some sects have been, to vilify and depreciate it.

But if the romance writers possess, in this respect, some superiority over Homer, in point of genius they are far inferior, and have never, therefore, been held in nearly the same estimation. Their merit seems, indeed, to have been rather under-rated; partly from the great extravagance of their fictions, and partly from the ridicule thrown on them by the celebrated novel of Cervantes. The specimen, which has lately been laid before us by Mr. Southey, is not only

interesting by the views which it gives of manners, but possesses a very respectable share of literary merit. With that simplicity which is the great charm of those early writings, it unites considerable descriptive and pathetic powers.

On the foundation of these romances, Ariosto has raised his poem of Orlando Furioso; a strange, wild, heterogeneous, production; displaying, however, great richness of fancy, and brilliancy of description, together with a very considerable portion of wit and humour. Its extreme licentiousness, however, detracts considerably from its merit in a moral point of view.

We proceed now to consider those prose fictions which have appeared in Europe, since the period of the revival of learning. These have been confined chiefly to France and England. We shall begin with noticing some of the most remarkable which have appeared in the former country.

FENELON.

The first that seems deserving of notice is Telemachus, the production of the amiable Fenelon. This work, like the Cyropædia of Xenophon, was composed chiefly with a view to the instruction of its readers. It does not proceed, however, upon the same plan. Telemachus is oftener held forth as a warning than as an example. This the author might find convenient as a delicate mode of pointing out the faults of his royal pupil, and warning him of the deference which he owed to his preceptor. But it renders the work in some respects less adapted to general use. The reader is sometimes in danger of sharing the errors of Telemachus; and, like him, of regarding with aversion the severity of Mentor. On other occasions, his misconduct is such as to render his character less interesting, and, consequently, the narrative less agreeable. The first part, where nothing of this kind occurs, is by much the most original and pleasing.

Upon the whole, the chief merit of Telemachus consists in the spirit which breathes throughout, and particularly in the reflections with which it is interspersed. Reflections, indeed, are rather out of place in a work of this nature: but these are so extremely beautiful, and come with such propriety from the mouth of Mentor, that they may well claim an exemption from the general rule.

As a work of genius, Telemachus is entitled to a very high rank. It is not, like the Cyropædia, a mere prose narrative. Though not written in verse, the style and sentiments are altogether poetical; so that it occupies a sort of middle place between the two species of composition. The style is pure, copious, flowing, rather defective in order and precision, but bearing everywhere marks of the richest and most beautiful imagination. This character applies particularly to the two or three first books. The warlike scenes at the conclusion were not so well suited to his genius; and he has there trod rather too closely in the footsteps of Homer and Virgil.

The immediate object which Fenelon proposed to himself in this undertaking, was disappointed by the untimely death of the young prince, whose education he superintended. It has not, however, on that account, been a fruitless labour. There can be no doubt of its having had a great and beneficial effect on the general spirit of the age. To it, perhaps, we may in some degree ascribe that humanity, and that concern for the welfare of their people, by which the sovereigns of Europe, during the eighteenth century, were so honourably distinguished.*

LE SAGE.

From Fenelon, we pass to one who has written in a different style, but with no less success; to Le Sage, the great painter of human life. The view of it given in his Gil Blas, is the most comprehensive that has appeared in this, or perhaps any other kind

* Gentz, Etat de l'Europe. Soulavie.

of writing. Probably, indeed, such knowledge may be better acquired from the biography of private life, than from works of fiction. The former, however, has not, till of late, obtained much of the public attention. It may be better, therefore, that, in its absence, we should have recourse to the latter, provided they be able and well conducted, than in such an important branch of knowledge, be left entirely to personal observation. Besides, in the affairs of nations, fabulous, has generally preceded, and prepared the way for authentic, history. The case is perhaps the same with biography; for which these narratives, besides their immediate use, may be the means of gradually introducing a taste.

Gil Blas is not free from those defects to which such compositions are liable. It is rather a satire upon human nature, than a just representation of it. The portrait, though bearing, no doubt, a striking resemblance to the original, is yet very strongly caricatured. There is a circumstance, indeed, which may make it appear more so to

us, than it really is. The scene of action is laid in Spain, and a correct view is given throughout of the manners of that ignorant and degraded people. Hence there may be at least local truth in the views which it exhibits, of the corruption of justice, of the extreme laziness and profligacy of the grandees, and of professional pedantry, presumption, and unskilfulness.

The plan which Le Sage has adopted, of leading his hero successively through the different scenes of life, enables him to include a wider range of information, than can be found in any other work. The character also, or rather want of character, in Gil Blas, is very judiciously adapted to his design. Had there been, in this, any thing peculiar and striking, it would have turned towards the hero too much of that attention, which the author wished to fix upon the world in general. He has composed it, therefore, like the generality of characters in real life, of yielding and flexible materials, which readily take an impression from the objects with which he is conversant.

There are no characters in Gil Blas which can be safely proposed as patterns of conduct. The hero himself is not very exemplary; and his favourite companions, Fabricius, Scipio, and others, are all rogues. In this respect, it appears to fall even beneath the standard of real life.

ROUSSEAU.

We turn now to a singular and celebrated production, the Nouvelle Heloise. High powers of genius, an exquisite and extreme sensibility, together with an eccentric and visionary turn of mind, are conspicuous throughout this, as well as the other writings of Rousseau. He himself admits it to have great faults in the eye of a reader of taste; but it has several, of which, probably, he was not aware. There is too much philosophy, and too little nature; rather a laboured analysis of passion, than the simple expression of it. The letters do not vary in their tone, according to the different persons from whom they proceed; but are uniformly written in the same imperious and dogmatic

tone, which marks his general style. Yet, when forgetting philosophy, he resigns himself to feeling, he certainly does often rise to a very high degree of eloquence and beauty. The most interesting part of the work appears to me to be that which immediately follows St. Preux's return to his native country; and the letter in which he describes that return, the very finest of the whole.

Rousseau has, in his Memoirs, given a full account of the circumstances which led to the composition of this romance. Tired of Paris, he withdrew to a small country-house at some distance from it. Hence he excluded, as much as possible, all visitors, in order to give himself up entirely to his taste for solitude, and visionary enjoyments. Here he describes himself as seized with the most violent propensity to love; but, deprived, by age and situation, of any object on which to fix it. In this condition he had one resource left, of a nature extremely well suited to his character. He created an imaginary mistress, adorned with every charm which could be supplied by his glowing

fancy. At length he went so far as to commence a correspondence with her, the letters on both sides being, of course, written by himself. These on a review, pleased him so much, as to give rise to the design of publishing them. But how appear as the author of a work so different from those which preceded it, so opposite to those severe and stern maxims, which he had formerly inculcated? No art is more common than that of finding reasons to justify what inclination leads to; nor is there any with which Rousseau appears to be better acquainted. He soon persuaded himself that there were circumstances in the manners of the times, which would render the Heloise preferable to works conducted with a stricter regard to morality. He urges, that the disorder of which it presents an example, is of a different, and less criminal nature, than that which had then become general throughout France. His object is therefore to substitute the one for the other. But it is surely a hazardous mode of inspiring any nation with new virtues, to begin by depriving them

of those they already possess. There is an evident danger of their at once retaining the old vices, and adopting the new. He urges also, that the lower the standard is brought down, the more chance there is of its becoming the object of imitation. This point has been discussed already in a former part of the work. Every one, I think, must allow, that Rousseau's standard is, in one instance at least, brought rather too low.

I would not, however, be understood to deny, that improvement may be drawn from some parts of the Heloise, particularly towards the conclusion. Still it is, on the whole, a dangerous performance, and one which it can hardly be thought safe to put into the hands of youthful readers.

VOLTAIRE.

Voltaire, who attempted every thing, has also composed romances. They are written very much in that extravagant oriental style, which seem to have been rendered fashionable in France by the success of the Arabian

Nights Entertainment. He has carried it, however, to a still greater excess than in these tales. The history, the manners, the mythology, of all ages and nations, are jumbled together. Nothing can be imagined more entirely devoid of nature or probability.

His view appears to have been not merely the amusement of his readers, but chiefly the propagation of certain opinions, not always of the best and most useful kind; and, indeed, it is difficult to conceive how truth could be at all promoted by fictions so extravagant. Besides false philosophy, they abound also with licentious morality. It must be owned, however, that they are frequently enlivened by those sallies of wit and gaiety, which render the general writings of this author so amusing.

PREVÔT.

It would be improper here not to mention Prevôt, though he does not appear to have attained the same celebrity in this country

as in France. This writer excels in a lively and natural mode of narration, which makes it difficult to believe that the events which he relates are not real. He possesses, also, very great pathetic powers. These appear particularly in the story of Manon L'Escaut; nothing can be more affecting than the conclusion of that little work.

His chief fault is the want of connection, and the desultory and unconnected manner in which the events succeed each other. And as there is little appearance of design in their structure, so there is as little in their tendency. He seems to have written whatever occurred to him, without much regard to either of these circumstances.

MARIVAUX.

The peculiar talent of Marivaux, is that of penetrating into the inmost recesses of the human heart, and laying open those secret motives, unperceived often by ourselves, which guide many of our actions. This is a talent in which the French writers have

surpassed those of most other nations. It may no doubt be the means of giving men a better knowledge both of their own character, and that of their neighbours. Yet I know not whether these researches may not become too minute; or whether there be not something ungenerous in prying so closely into the little weaknesses of our nature. The habit of tracing good, or at least indifferent actions, to mean and unworthy motives, is apt to induce doubts as to the very existence of virtue and dignity of character. Marianne, however, the best of his productions, is not only very interesting, but, on the whole, of a good tendency.

BARTHELEMI.

Works of fiction, in general, do not require, or, at least, do not afford, an opportunity of displaying much of that knowledge which is derived from books. We have now, however, to notice one, for the execution of which, the most profound and extensive learning was requisite.

An universal desire prevails, to inquire into the private history and character of those men who have risen to any high distinction in public life. No narratives are surer of success than these, even when but indifferently executed. A disposition somewhat similar is felt in regard to those nations which have acted a conspicuous part on the great theatre of the world. And it is felt still more strongly, when these nations are very ancient; when the picture has contracted that venerable shade which time throws over it. But, among the different nations of antiquity, Greece holds a high pre-eminence, both in arts and in military glory. Hence a natural wish to become acquainted with the manners, the domestic habits, the pleasures, and employments, with which life was diversified, during those ages, to which we are accustomed to look up with such profound veneration. The narratives, however, which have been handed down to us from thence, are almost all on historical and political subjects, with only slight and incidental notices of any other. They afford, therefore, no full

gratification for this natural curiosity. It was probably the consideration of these circumstances which led Barthelemi to the composition of his Travels of Anacharsis. The undertaking was arduous. To collect the information, consisting frequently of mere hints, scattered through an immense multitude of volumes, to form this into a regular and complete system, to weave it into the form of an amusing and interesting narrative, required a rare assemblage of talents. These Barthelemi has certainly shewn himself to be very eminently possessed of. He discovers a perfect knowledge of the subject, united with a warmth and eloquence of style, which are extremely pleasing. We feel ourselves transported, as it were, into classic ground; we become the contemporaries of the heroes and sages who adorned that illustrious period. Perhaps it might have been better had he confined himself more to the delineation of ancient manners. Historical details are not advantageously introduced, since they must want that distinctness which arises from the observance of local and chro-

nological order. The long dissertations on the constitution and government of particular states, might, perhaps, more agreeably, and more consistently, with the design, have been thrown into the form of narrative and dialogue. The manners, too, have not altogether preserved their ancient simplicity, but are a good deal modernized, and, if I may use the expression, *Frenchified.* Upon the whole, however, it is an admirable performance, and perfectly deserving of the high reputation it has attained.

GENLIS.

This list of French writers may be properly concluded by Madame de Genlis, who has produced several works of fiction, in which amusement and instruction are elegantly combined. Most of them were designed for the use of children, whose education formed the chief employment of that ingenious lady. The style is therefore studiously adapted to their comprehension. They may be of use, however, not merely

to children, but also to those who have the superintendance of their education. Every observation which they contain on this subject is entitled to respect, as being the result of long and careful experience.

The Tales of the Castle are introduced in the course of a continued dialogue, which contains reflections upon each successive tale. This is certainly preferable to a moral, as having a much better chance of being read. It may be of advantage in teaching young people habits of thinking, which are always useful, though better exercised upon real occurrences.

The only objection which I would make to these narratives, is, that the design of instructing is rather too visible. The preceptress appears too plainly in every page. This, as was formerly observed, is a danger to be guarded against by those who write with the same laudable intentions as Madame de Genlis.

From France we turn now to our own country. The first fictions produced here, that seem deserving of notice, are those which made their appearance in periodical

publications. This mode of writing was introduced about the beginning of the last century, by a society of men of the most distinguished abilities, with the view of diffusing knowledge and just views of human life, among the more illiterate part of their countrymen. Being addressed to this class of readers, it was necessary that the instruction should be communicated in an agreeable and attractive form. Fictitious narratives, therefore, have always been deemed an essential requisite in such an undertaking.

ADDISON.

Among these writers, the pre-eminence seems to be justly due to Addison. His papers form the chief ornament of the Spectators, Guardians, and Tatlers, the first, and still perhaps the best, of periodical works. In his narratives, we discover, united, a careful observation of human nature, wit the most elegant and pleasing, and an entire freedom from every kind of coarseness and ill-nature. It would appear from the manner in which he repeatedly

expresses himself, that many of his portraits are drawn from real life, and that the names only are changed. This is no doubt an advantage, now especially that it cannot be followed by any invidious effects. His great object seems to be the laying hold of such as are marked by amusing eccentricities, especially where these are united with genuine worth and goodness. Such, in a peculiar degree, afford scope for that delicate and good humoured satire in which he excels.

Of these characters, the most striking, and the most exquisitely drawn, is that of Sir Roger de Coverley. He is the old English country gentleman, full of goodness and simplicity, and without any of the roughness and coarseness, which were usually attendant on that mode of life. Every one is interested and delighted by this character. His harmless singularities, while they amuse, serve only to attach us the more strongly to him. Yet it may be difficult to say, how far morality is likely to derive advantage from the exhibition of such a portrait. It may certainly inspire a love of

goodness, but not, I suspect, much wish to imitate it. So mortifying to human pride is even the most delicate kind of ridicule, that though our regard may be no way lessened for the person who is the object of it, yet we would not, on any account, risk the becoming ourselves that object. This is a character, therefore, which we love, without wishing to resemble.

JOHNSON.

About half a century after, Johnson, treading in the footsteps of Addison, undertook the Rambler, a work similar in design, though very differently executed. He possessed nothing of the wit, the ease, or the graces, of his predecessor. His familiar narratives representing common life and English manners, are therefore heavy and uninteresting. These subjects were not well suited to his genius, nor could they be well managed by so bulky and unwieldy a style. But he has succeeded admirably in those which require the delineation of foreign manners,

and of oriental splendour; as in Seged, Morad, Anningait and Ajut, to which we may add Rasselas. In these we find a richness of imagination, together with a pomp and magnificence of language, hardly to be paralleled.

The fictions of Johnson are of the second order, and have generally some maxim, which they are designed to inculcate. His great object seems to be to impress his readers with a deep persuasion of the vanity and wretchedness of human life. Here, perhaps, he has gone too far. Doubtless, the writer would be to blame, who should represent life as the scene of perpetual and unclouded gaity. And as this is the side of the picture which men in general love too much to contemplate, it may often be important to fix their eyes on its darker shades. Yet here also excess may be hurtful, and may tend to produce that habitual unhappiness, which is closely connected with the indulgence of discontent and malignant passions.

HAWKESWORLH.

The merits of Hawkesworth cannot, in a general view, be put in competition with those of his two predecessors. In the particular department, however, of which we are speaking, he is little inferior to either. The stories interspersed form the chief ornament of the Adventurer. They display, indeed, neither the wit of Addison, nor the magnificence of Johnson; but they excel both in exciting that interest which arises from a chain of well connected incidents. Hilario and Flavilla are superior, in this respect, to any thing we find, either in the Spectator or Rambler. This author shews also great knowledge of the town, though chiefly, it must be owned, of the most profligate and dissolute part of it. Hence many of the pictures which his work presents are not of a kind with which it is desirable that the youthful mind should become familiar. They may be taken, indeed, as warnings, and were probably so intended by the au-

thor. Warnings, however, are better afforded by real, than by fictitious occurrences; and when vices are thus minutely described, there is a danger of the principle of contagion beginning to operate.

With regard to the Mirror and Lounger, this department in those papers is chiefly distinguished by the contributions of Mr. Mackenzie. For particular reasons, however, I shall reserve, till a future occasion, my observations on the writings of this gentleman.

RICHARDSON.

From the little narratives interspersed in periodical productions, we now proceed to those on a greater scale, which constitute an entire work by themselves. Richardson, of course, stands foremost on this list. Before his time, there seems to have been nothing of any note, with the exception of a few indecent and scandalous chronicles. And as he was first in time, so he seems still to hold rather the first rank in the general estimation. His merit, however, is not equally acknow-

ledged by all. He is a writer highly original, abounding both with beauties and defects; and as either of these happen most to strike the mind of the reader, different opinions are formed. Hence there may be a peculiar difficulty in giving such an opinion as may satisfy every description of readers.

Richardson's compositions approach very nearly to the dramatic form. No opportunity is lost of engaging his personages in dialogues which he is seldom in haste to terminate. The little narrative which occurs, serves chiefly as a cement to bind these together; and the style even of it very nearly resembles that of common conversation. The argumentative discussions, though frequent, are by no means those in which he shines most. He wanted those comprehensive views, and those habits of thinking, which were necessary to render them interesting and instructive. His wit, too, though by no means devoid of merit, does not, on the whole, appear to me very lively or natural. But his grand power is certainly in the carrying on of pathetic and impassioned scenes.

Those at the conclusion of Clarissa are perhaps unequalled in point of tragic effect.

Richardson possesses, in an eminent degree, that first requisite of dramatic writing, the power of identifying himself, as it were, with the speaker, of making him utter, not the cold language of a spectator, but that which flows naturally from the passion by which he is inspired. The epistolary form, which he has used, excels the mere dramatic in the opportunity it affords of describing tones and gestures, in which he excels equally as in the language by which they are accompanied.

The particular in which Richardson is most deficient, is his style. It is strikingly devoid at once of ease, elegance, and dignity. It very much resembles what is usual among females in that rank of life in which, previous to commencing author, he was accustomed to move. This has been well accounted for by Mrs. Barbauld, from his intimacy with female society, and female letter writing. I know not how far, even in this view, it can be considered as a favourable specimen.

But whatever opinion may be formed as to the execution of Richardson's novels, there can be no doubt of their design being the best and most laudable that can be imagined. None, it is probable, were ever undertaken from purer motives. Should we suppose this circumstance to have contributed, in any considerable degree, to their success, the supposition could not certainly be considered as injurious to the public taste.

Grandison belongs to the third order of fictions, its hero being evidently designed for the model of a character as perfect as possible. Xenophon, as we have seen, had long before endeavoured to delineate that of a sovereign prince; but this is perhaps the first instance of a similar attempt in private life. It is drawn at great length, with much labour, and evidently with the most anxious desire of rendering it useful and the object of imitation. It has not, however, been exempted from the charges which are usually brought against such characters. It has been complained of as not very interesting, and as not forming the most attractive

object even in the work to which it belongs. Grandison seems rather formal and devoid of animation: his conduct is somewhat too entirely governed by reason. In his anxiety to draw a correct model of virtuous conduct, Richardson seems to have forgot how necessary it was to present it under a pleasing aspect, to interest the imagination and feelings in its favour. This last is the proper province of fancy; and however perfectly a writer may fulfil the former part of his task, if, at the same time, he fails in the latter, his work, far from being of a good tendency, will be the very reverse. We are far, however, from insinuating that Richardson's failure is such as to render this remark in any degree applicable. Objections of a different kind may perhaps be stated, such as apply in general to the heroes of modern novels, most of whom have been formed after the model of Grandison. He is not engaged in any sphere of public or professional usefulness. His time and attention are almost entirely engrossed by the two rival fair ones to

whom he is the object of so passionate an attachment. At the same time, the character is certainly on the whole possessed of a high degree of excellence, and is perhaps entitled to a preference over any other which fiction has hitherto exhibited; nor can it be doubted, that the intimate acquaintance formed with it in the course of so long a work, must have a favourable influence on the moral feelings of the reader.

Clarissa is designed as a moral romance, and seems liable to all the objections formerly stated against that kind of composition. In the character of Lovelace, the most unprincipled depravity is united with some very captivating and seductive qualities. Even when his crimes are at their height, the writer is careful to throw over them some softening shades, which may prevent him from forfeiting entirely the good opinion of the reader. Nor does the catastrophe which overtakes him in the end seem to have a very close connection with the crimes of which he has been guilty. Had he suffered from internal remorse, or from the general indignation of mankind, these would have been pro-

per and natural punishments. But the being killed in a duel, besides the kind of sanction afforded to that practice, can hardly be considered otherwise than as an accidental occurrence.

The strongest moral impression made by this work, is that derived from the exalted and saint-like purity of the character of Clarissa, and the unparalleled depth of distress in which she is involved. No proof can be more striking how little prosperity is necessary to render a character interesting. This is doubtless the circumstance which renders our sympathy with Clarissa so much deeper than we have ever felt for Sir Charles Grandison; though it must be owned that Richardson seems more successful in drawing female characters than those of his own sex.

Pamela affords an example of steadiness and virtue in a very trying situation, and amid dangers to which young females in her rank of life are not unfrequently exposed. To such, therefore, should it fall into their hands, it may afford often a very useful lesson. I cannot approve however of the reward which this conduct receives in a mar-

riage with her rich and profligate master. This tends to raise expectations which must commonly prove delusive; and it encourages the propensity so common among the vulgar, to regard a rise in point of rank as an exaltation to the summit of human felicity. Both in Pamela and Clarissa, a number of indelicate scenes are introduced, and are described with a minuteness of detail which does not tend very much to the edification of the reader.

FIELDING,

The contemporary and rival of Richardson, was a writer certainly of very extraordinary genius. Exquisite wit, an intimate knowledge of human nature, and a lively representation of manners, are conspicuous throughout all his productions. He excels also in the structure of his fable, and in the art of keeping alive the curiosity of the reader. The chief faults in his manner of writing are, pedantry and ostentation of learning, mixed with a good deal of affecta-

tion. Nor can we approve those long digressions introduced with the view of displaying his own knowledge, and defending his work from the assaults of criticism. Whatever merit these may possess in themselves, they are here greatly out of place; as tending to dissipate that impression of reality, which it ought to be the great object of the writer to keep up.

The novels of Fielding are generally allowed to be in some respects exceptionable; nevertheless there runs through them a very noble and beautiful vein of morality. Benevolence, generosity, disinterestedness, are strongly inculcated throughout. Several perfect characters are even introduced; as Allworthy in Tom Jones, and Harrison in Amelia. Yet though these be extremely well drawn, they are not likely to become, in any great degree, the objects of imitation. They are men advanced in life; they are not the leading characters, nor those into whose views and sentiments the reader is disposed to enter with the greatest interest.

Fielding is blamable chiefly in the cha-

racter of his heroes, where he has united many agreeable and truly estimable qualities, with a very considerable degree of profligacy. There is great danger, therefore, that, in the minds of youthful readers, the two may be confounded together, and the latter seem thus excusable, and even graceful. The same objection does not apply to his heroines, though their character does not contain any thing very marked or interesting. We except Amelia, who affords an admirable picture of sweetness and conjugal affection.

Joseph Andrews, his first production, contains the history of a young man in the lowest rank of life. Fielding, like Richardson, seems to have begun there, and to have gradually ascended. With the exception of some indecent passages, it seems to be, upon the whole, unexceptionable, and even of a good tendency. There is little or nothing in the conduct of Joseph, which might not be recommended to the imitation of any one who is placed in the same circumstances. I disapprove, however, in the same manner,

and for the same reasons, as in Pamela, of the hacknied incident of a discovery of noble birth and consequent removal into a different station. Had the two lovers been settled respectably and comfortably in their original station, the effect would, in my opinion, have been better, and even more agreeable to a reader of correct taste.

It is in Tom Jones that both the strength of Fielding's genius and his moral defects are most strikingly conspicuous. The character of the hero abounds with generosity and other amiable qualities, but tends at the same time to represent these as connected with thoughtlessness and irregularity of conduct; an idea already too common, and which has been the ruin of thousands. That such a character does not unfrequently occur in real life, can be no sufficient reason for introducing it here, and for embellishing it in a manner which must captivate every youthful reader. The species of reformation which takes place at the end, a common tribute to virtue on these occasions, cannot compensate for the course of

conduct which has been uniformly persevered in through the rest of the story; nor will any one acquainted with the power of habit be very sanguine as to its continuance. The character of Blifil, too, is no less exceptionable than that of his opponent. Its evident tendency to represent regularity and prudence as intimately connected with deceit and malignity.

Booth seems to be formed nearly after the model of his predecessor Tom Jones, though he does not act so distinguished a part. The most interesting object in this pleasing novel is Amelia herself.

In the representation of manners, particularly in the dramatic part, I believe the writer will always be found to excel most in regard to those classes of men with whom he has been most in the habit of conversing. This will not give us any very high idea of Fielding's companions. Innkeepers, rogues, and female demireps, are the characters with whom he seems most completely at home. A just picture of fashionable life was reserved for the pens of our female novelists.

Smollet is still coarser than Fielding, and does not possess the same intimate knowledge of the human heart. As a painter of manners, however, he is little, if at all, inferior. He excels particularly in those of seamen, chiefly, no doubt, from having been once engaged in that profession himself. But his most striking talent seems to be humour, the exhibition of odd and eccentric characters. Of these he has assembled, in Humphrey Clinker, the most ludicrous and amusing collection that is anywhere to be found.

In a moral view, Smollet is inferior to Fielding. The vices of his heroes are at least as great, without the same good qualities to counterbalance them. We meet nothing of that refined generosity, and those just sentiments, at least, of moral conduct, which Fielding's heroes discover. Indeed, Smollet, in regard to his, seems to make hardly any distinction between their best

and their worst actions; both are related in the same animated and approving manner.

Roderick Random is generally supposed to contain only an embellished narrative of his own adventures. The character of the hero, therefore, is naturally supposed to resemble his own; high spirited, irritable, and vindictive; not devoid of a certain rough generosity and good humour, but destitute of any fixed principles, and readily yielding to every temptation which chance throws in his way. There is more real life and business in this novel than are commonly to be met with. It does not, indeed, always present these under the most favourable aspect, but is deeply tinged with those irritable and satirical habits which appear to have strongly predominated in the mind of the writer.

Peregrine Pickle presents us with nearly the same features, only that the humour is broader, and the manners still coarser and more licentious.

Humphrey Clinker contains less incident, and is therefore not quite so attractive to the bulk of readers. But it possesses, perhaps,

more genuine merit, as being that in which Smollet has most completely displayed his talent for the ludicrous delineation of character. Bramble is supposed to be a picture of himself in more advanced life, after his spirit was lowered, and his temper soured by age and infirmity. He discovers, however, a view of worth and benevolence, which did not appear in his youthful predecessors. In Tabitha malignity and ill-temper are very properly represented under a ridiculous and disgusting aspect. The tendency of the whole is nearly unexceptionable.

BURNEY.

Proceeding in the order of time, we come now to the purer and more elegant performances of Miss Burney. The distinguishing excellence of this lady is, as might be expected, a perfect acquaintance with whatever relates to the character and peculiar circumstances of her own sex. She excels particularly in describing the feelings of a young lady at her first entrance into the

world; the hopes, the fears, the little embarrassments, which agitate her mind at this interesting crisis. Nothing can exceed the picture of these which is given in Evelina. The venial errors into which she is betrayed by youth and inexperience, with the disastrous consequences which threaten to ensue, are described in a manner the most lively and natural. The correct view which is given of the habits prevalent in the fashionable circles, must be useful both to those who are destined to move in them, and to such as wish to form a general estimate of the reigning manners. It is only to be regretted that she should have occasionally given way to a somewhat mean species of buffoonery, from which the elegant taste she has elsewhere displayed, might have been expected to preserve her.

In the Brangton family the awkward attempts frequently made by the trading part of society to copy the manners of fashionable life are very happily ridiculed. Perhaps, however, this part of the work may tend to increase that horror of vulgarity, and

that disposition to sigh after the abodes of elegance and fashion, to which young ladies, at the age of Evelina, are of themselves in general sufficiently inclined.

Cecilia is more varied in incident, but of a somewhat more romantic and extravagant cast. Many of the characters, too, are a good deal *outrés*. In Harrel, however, is given an admirable picture of the thoughtless and unfeeling man of pleasure, and in the Delvilles, of family pride, shewing itself under various aspects, according to the different age and disposition of each.

Camilla discovers a vein of good sense, and of accommodation to the actual circumstances of society, which is rarely found in compositions of this kind. Sir Hugh Tyrold is a complete original, and admirably drawn. He may almost be placed by the side of Sir Roger de Coverley.

Notwithstanding the just views of human life which abound in the writings of this lady, it may be observed, that their groundwork does not essentially differ from the generality of similar performances. How far

this is to be considered as matter of praise or censure, we shall presently have occasion to examine.

MOORE.

Dr. Moore has given an admirable picture of the manners of young men of fashion, and of the various follies to which they are liable. With them, his former habits of life had led him very much to associate. The portraits of this writer appear to me juster, more free from exaggeration and caricature, than those of any other that has yet been mentioned. This may probably be ascribed to his great knowledge of the world, and to that good sense which, rather than any brilliancy of parts, seems to have formed the predominant feature in his character.

Zeluco is a singular and somewhat whimsical performance. Fiction affords an opportunity of representing, not better only, but also worse characters than are to be found in real life; and the representation may not be altogether without its use. The

picture is strongly drawn; yet Zeluco does not appear to me to be the best of Dr. Moore's productions, nor that which affords most scope for the display of his peculiar excellencies. This place I would assign to Edward, a work abounding with knowledge of the world, and lively delineation of character. That of its hero, too, is such as enables it to hold a respectable rank among the third order of fictions.

Mordaunt is exceptionable in the character of its hero, which is that of a dissolute man of fashion, entirely devoid of principle, and with almost no good qualities except wit and good nature. Yet, by means of these, united with a large fortune and a handsome person, he becomes the complete fine gentleman, the envy of one sex, and the admiration of the other. This is evidently holding out a very dangerous and seductive example. As a picture of manners, this novel is very inferior to Edward; yet some parts, particularly towards the conclusion, possess great merit in this respect.

GENERAL CHARACTER OF ENGLISH NOVELS.

The English writers whom we have now surveyed, with the exception of Richardson, rest their merit chiefly on the representation of life and manners. But this cannot be said of the more ordinary novels, which are poured forth in such multitudes, and read with such eager avidity. Works so extensively circulated, and which form the principal, if not the sole, reading of a great variety of persons, can hardly fail to have a considerable influence on national manners. It may be proper, therefore, to spend some time in examining the materials of which they are composed, and whether or not their tendency be favourable to the public improvement. My judgment on this subject will be formed chiefly from those of Mrs. Smith, the only writer among this numerous class with whom I can boast any intimate acquaintance. The following may be given as a general outline

of the manner in which these works are conducted.—

A young gentleman and lady, paragons of beauty and excellence, meet accidentally with each other. Both are instantly seized with the most violent passion, over which reason possesses no kind of controul. The lover throws himself at the feet of his mistress, or, by expressive gestures, makes a sufficiently evident declaration of his sentiments. She, on her part, is equally enamoured, but is withheld by modesty, and by the necessity of lengthening out the story, from making an immediate confession. This is at last obtained; but, if the affair, as in ordinary cases, were to end here, the reader might have reason to complain of the scanty amusement afforded him. Obstacles must therefore be raised: inhuman parents, and detested rivals, must unite in opposing the completion of the lovers' felicity. Embarrassments arising from want of fortune are generally resorted to as the means of placing an insuperable bar to their

union. On a sudden, however, these are removed; wealth flows in from unexpected sources; friends are reconciled; rivals are killed or discarded; the two parties are married; upon which the scene closes, there being nothing more to be done or said.

The first thing that strikes us here is the perfection with which the leading characters are uniformly invested. So far as this circumstance operates, I have no doubt of its effects being on the whole beneficial. At the same time, it must be owned to be rather a vague and visionary kind of perfection, not very applicable to the purposes of active life. The accomplishments of person and manner form generally its most prominent features; any higher qualities appear only occasionally, and as appendages. The characters are drawn chiefly from that class of society which, raised above the necessity of following a profession for subsistence, is at the same time excluded from any concern in public affairs. It is seldom, therefore, that they are engaged in any active or useful employment; this, I believe, would rather be

considered as a disqualifying circumstance. They are represented as having nothing to do, and sauntering from one place to another in search of amusement.

This observation does not apply in the same degree to female characters, who, by nature and custom, are confined to the scenes of domestic life and social intercourse. It is only one part of their life, however, which enters into these compositions, and not that in which they have the most important duties to perform. The instruction conveyed by them must therefore be at least very limited.

The next circumstance to which we may advert, is their besng so exclusively occupied by the passion of love. There seems no reason, indeed, why it should be excluded. Considering the force of this passion, and the intimate and lasting connection to which it leads, its due regulation cannot be considered as a matter of indifference. Still it must be allowed to occupy, in these narratives, a space out of all proportion greater than what really belongs to it. It has been doubted also, whether, in other respects, the

direction which they tend to give it be just or useful.

It is of importance that this passion should be pure, and should be confined within the limits prescribed by virtue, and by a regard to the welfare of society. And here the narratives in question seem liable to little objection. When compared with those which preceded them, and more particularly with those which, during the last twenty or thirty years, have issued from the French press, they seem entitled even to considerable praise. In the latter point of view, indeed, it may be doubted, whether their merit be not diminished by the too frequent introduction of this passion. When it becomes, as these works tend to make it, not the occasional, but the great and constant, business of life, it must be more difficult to fix it constantly on any one object.

The next point is, that the lover should be well directed in the choice of this object. From the perusal of these works he will naturally be led to seek one possessed of every imaginable degree of perfection: but there

are several dangers with which such a disposition is attended. For, as was formerly observed, though it be very desirable that a man should aim at this quality in himself, it is by no means equally so that he should require it from others. Allowance must here be made for that imperfection which will ever adhere to humanity. The nature of this perfection, too, consisting chiefly in beauty and superficial accomplishments, will be apt to draw off the attention from more lasting and valuable qualities. That ardour of passion, by which the lover invests his mistress with every perfection, and transforms her even into an object of adoration, can hardly be accompanied with any great degree of judgment and discrimination. Accordingly his love is generally sudden, formed at first sight, without any of the caution and deliberation requisite in a choice that involves so deeply the happiness of his future life.

Another circumstance, no less characteristic of the narratives in question, is that multitude of improbable incidents, unex-

pected meetings, and unhoped for deliverances, with which they are crowded. Upon these, perhaps, rests chiefly their popularity, and their wide circulation among the tasteless and illiterate. This subject has already been treated at some length; nor did there then appear to be any reason to approve of the practice. It tends to inspire a man with false views of human life, visionary expectations, and discontent with the real occurrences of his lot. Though the pleasure it affords is of a very low order, yet none is more apt, when much indulged in, to engross the mind entirely. It tends thus to take away all sensibility to higher beauties, as well as all disposition to apply to severer and more arduous studies.

These observations are not meant to apply peculiarly to the writings of Mrs. Smith, but in general to that class of which they are the most eminent. As it might be going too far, to proscribe this kind of reading entirely, a few of her's may, with propriety be recommended to such as wish to form some acquaintance with it. They possess all the

requisites of this kind of writing in a considerable, though none perhaps in a very high, degree. They are always interesting and amusing, and, except in the particulars above mentioned, completely unexceptionable.

From our own country, we may now cast our eyes for a moment towards Germany. That country, long distinguished for heavy industry, and productive only of literary drudges, has of late exerted an extraordinary activity in every direction. Works of imagination have been produced in great profusion, and have excited, in a considerable degree, the admiration of all Europe. Nor is this admiration altogether unmerited; though they are by no means correct, either in point of taste or morals. In general, they display force and wildness of genius; a deep tincture of ferocity; a disposition to trample upon established opinions, and to carry every sentiment to the utmost possible degree of extravagance and excess. Their morality is of a very extraordinary nature.

We have already had occasion to observe the dangerous effect of great faults appearing in a character which, on the whole, commands admiration. This, though extremely common, takes place elsewhere through mere accident or inclination. Here it is done systematically. Some virtue is drawn in the most interesting and attractive form, with the express view of recommending a vice, or even a crime, with which it is united in the same character. This, perhaps, often arises less from any criminal design of perverting the public morals, than from that undistinguishing rage for novelty, which actuates every department of German literature.

The most eminent in this style of writing are, Schiller, Gothé, and Kotzebue. Although all the three have written novels, yet their reputation rests almost entirely on their dramatic performances. We must except the Werter of Gothé, which, for reasons that will appear hereafter, I do not mean at present to notice.

The best of the German novelists is La

Fontaine. He is certainly an interesting writer. With considerable knowledge of human nature, he unites strong pathetic powers. These appear particularly in Clara Duplessis, the best of his performances which I have read. There occurs often, however, a mixture of the serious and ludicrous, in the same character, which is rather unpleasant. We do not relish seeing ridicule thrown on those whom we have viewed with admiration; nor those, at whom we have been laughing, on a sudden converted into heroes. Neither does he always keep free of extravagance and affectation. His works discover, in general, an amiable turn of mind, and seem to be written with very good intentions. It is only to be regretted that he should have adopted, in common with most of his countrymen, that mode of thinking which represents virtue as the companion of ignorance and rudeness; an opinion, by no means well founded; and the prevalence of which has of late been attended with very hurtful effects.

The works on which observations have now been made, are all reducible, more or less, to the three descriptions formerly enumerated. There are other species, however, which, though they could not with propriety be introduced then, are not to be passed over entirely. The principal may be comprehended under the four heads of Ludicrous, Descriptive, Allegorical, and Sentimental.

LUDICROUS.—DON QUIXOTE.

The taste for ridicule is a very general one, and implanted in our nature, no doubt, for wise purposes. It does not, indeed, seem very properly employed against vice, or against errors of reasoning on important subjects. Its use is to guard against those little follies and improprieties, which, without being criminal, tend to render the character less respectable and agreeable. Fictions, which aim at the representation of manners, generally exhibit their characters in a ludicrous point of view. This, though it render

them more amusing, lessens their value as just pictures of life. But there are works in which ridicule is the sole and ultimate object. These, however, are chiefly dramatic. I know only of one very eminent narrative fiction which comes under this description. This, the reader, it is probable, will immediately conjecture to be that of Don Quixote.

Chivalry, as we have seen, was, in itself, a beneficent institution, and a step towards the civilization of modern Europe. As soon, however, as the sovereign, on the one hand, and the people on the other, acquired an influence superior to that of the nobles, and found it for their mutual interest to establish a regular administration of justice, the operation of this principle became no longer necessary. It had come, in process of time, to be very much abused. The people often suffered more from their defenders than from those against whom they had taken arms. The improving reason, too, of the age, began to revolt against the multitude of incredible tales with which its records were

loaded. Chivalry became thus a fit subject for ridicule; and, at this juncture, appeared the work in question, from the pen of one of the greatest geniuses of the age.

We are here presented with an instance of that species of partial madness, which occurs not unfrequently in real life. A worthy man, in other respects of a sound judgment, has his head so turned by reading books of chivalry, that he sees nothing in nature but castles and palaces, giants and enchanters. Into these he transforms every thing he meets with; and the author has very happily chosen the meanest objects of common life for the subject of this metamorphosis. The striking contrasts which are thus produced, the monstrous mistakes and ludicrous distresses of the hero, are painted in so lively a manner, as to render this the most laughable performance perhaps that the wit of man ever produced.

No work was ever productive of such great and decicive effects on the manners of the age. Not that it can be considered as the sole, or even the principal, cause of the

decline of chivalry : but it certainly accelerated and formed the epoch of its final downfal.

DESCRIPTIVE.—MRS. RADCLIFFE.

The next we shall notice are those which may be termed Descriptive romances. This name, I think, may be properly given to those of Mrs. Radcliffe, one of the most original and powerful writers of the present age. These do not tend to fulfil any of the practical purposes above mentioned. They are to be considered chiefly as poetry, and in many parts, as the very finest of poetry. She appears, indeed, to excel less in the minute detail of natural scenery, than in grand and comprehensive views of it; and with these she has blended a peculiar vein of sentiment, which greatly heightens their charm.

It may be doubted, indeed, whether works of this kind, especially such as, like hers, rest very much upon incident, be well suited to frequent and long descriptions. Perhaps she does not always choose the best

time for introducing them, when there is a pause in the action; but sometimes thrusts them in, when the reader is intent upon something altogether different. Certain it is, that, by ordinary readers, who have in view only the gratification of curiosity, they are looked upon rather as a blemish.

This writer also excels greatly in the representation of fierce and terrible characters; not the internal workings of these characters, but the picturesque appearance which they exhibit in the eye of a spectator. Nor must we omit the talent she so strikingly possesses, of conjuring up scenes of horror. The pleasure, indeed, which this affords, though natural, is not of a very high order; and, till her time, was confined chiefly to the nursery. Nor is it of a very improving nature, but, on the contrary, tends rather to weaken the mind, and make it liable to superstitious apprehensions. But it is impossible not to admire her power of raising this impression to its utmost height, and of combining the circumstances best calculated to produce it.

In those parts where she goes over similar

ground with other writers of the same description, she does not rise very much above mediocrity. It is in those paths which she has traced out for herself, that the superiority of her genius chiefly appears.

ALLEGORICAL.

Another kind is that which goes by the name of Allegory. Here some qualities of mind are personified, and are introduced as the principal or sole actors in the story. Its aim is generally to communicate a knowledge of abstract or moral truths to such as would not willingly have read a formal treatise on the subject. In this view it may be of some use; yet I am afraid little attention is to be expected to any thing beyond the mere story. Nor is this likely to be very interesting. We cannot take any deep concern in the adventures of an abstract idea; whenever the name of any of the actors is mentioned, we are reminded that he could not possibly have any real existence. Hence these compositions rest their merit chiefly on

the poetical and descriptive passages. The most elegant and instructive that I remember to have seen, is the Vision of Mirza in the Spectator.

In countries where a severe restraint is laid on the liberty of speech and writing, the allegory is used as a vehicle of bold truths, which could not have been safely expressed in any other form. This is probably the cause of its being so favourite a mode of composition among the oriental nations. There is not, in this case, the same reason to apprehend inattention on the part of the reader. Being excluded from any other means of acquiring information on the subject, he will naturally exert all his ingenuity in order to discover the concealed meaning. It is much to be regretted, when truth can find no other way of coming into the world; when such, however, is the case, it may be necessary and useful to have recourse to this.

SENTIMENTAL.

The last description of fictitious composi-

tions which I shall mention, are those designed to be the vehicle of Sentiment. This is a kind of writing hardly known till about the middle of the last century, and perhaps may be considered as a new modification of thought which has been unfolded in the progress of refinement. On no subject are the opinions of men more divided: while by some it is regarded with the most profound and exclusive admiration, and by others with an equal degree of aversion and contempt. In this state of things, it seems desirable, therefore, that an attempt were made to form something like a candid estimate of its merits. The subject is attended with peculiar difficulties; both from being new, and from those various and evanescent shades, which cannot be easily laid hold of, or subjected to any kind of analysis. The following very imperfect sketch may be of some use in the absence of any other; and may possibly be the means of prompting some one, better qualified, to give a complete and masterly view of the subject.

The first question is, to what faculty of

the mind this principle is to be referred. With the reasoning and the active powers, it does not appear to have much connection. Imagination, when highly refined, may enter, in some degree, into its composition. But feeling is evidently the part of our nature to which it is most closely allied, and the pathetic ever its favourite theme. Yet these alone cannot constitute sentimental writing, since they were to be found long before it had any existence. It seems to consist chiefly in the delineation of certain minute and delicate sensations, which were before unfelt, or at least unnoticed.

The authors in question do not profess to address themselves to the bulk of mankind, but only to a select few, whose minds are in unison with their own. They delight, therefore, in a peculiar kind of obscurity, and in the employment of a mystical language, understood only by the adepts. Many of the ideas deing new, new forms of expression must be adopted. Frequently even words cannot be found to delineate sentiments so highly refined. In this case,

after the writer has gone on as far as language can carry him, he stops, and a blank is left, which the reader must fill up for himself. Hence these works, to such as do not find a key to them in their own minds, appear wholly absurd and unintelligible; and hence, too, an unusual exultation in those who can decypher the secret characters which are thus hid from vulgar eyes.

Nothing is more remarkable in sentimental works than the rambling manner in which they are written, the want of all apparent order and connection, and the frequent breaking off from one subject to another widely remote from it. Unity and consistency, elsewhere thought so essential, are here totally neglected. The writers having dismissed reason, and taken feeling for their sole guide, seem to think themselves absolved from any rules which the former may prescribe. We may observe, however, that the want of order is not altogether so great as at first sight appears. The ideas are connected, not indeed in the ordinary manner, but by certain secret links, not discernible by common

readers. Of these links the most general seem to be, either the resemblance, or the contrast, of the sentiments which they tend to inspire.

This habit of mind is generally accompanied by a cast of melancholy; not a gloomy and severe melancholy, but of that gentle and pleasing kind which, by those who are acquainted with it, is preferred to the most exuberant sallies of mirth. Some degree of this disposition, by the slow succession of ideas which it produces, seems favourable both to strength and delicacy of sentiment.

These authors delight greatly in minute observations upon human nature. A similar tendency has been observed to exist in certain French writers, who, in this particular, excel those of most other nations. There is a striking difference, however, between the two, in the manner of gratifying this propensity. The scrutiny of the latter is of a malignant nature, and consists in laying open those mean and bad motives, which a man would not willingly own to the world, nor

even to himself. The object of the former, on the contrary, is to draw forth the amiable propensities which lie concealed under an unpromising outward appearance. Even where they attack failings, there is nothing coarse or insulting in their raillery: it is frequently such as even its object could listen to without pain.

Having thus endeavoured to trace some of the characteristics of this kind of writing, the more difficult and important question remains as to its tendency. With the view of ascertaining this, I shall first consider the particulars in which it appears to be beneficial, and then proceed to those on which it may be necessary to pronounce an opposite sentence.

One merit which it has always claimed, is that of promoting benevolence. This is the favourite virtue, whose praises are found in every page. It has been stigmatized, indeed, as rather an indolent kind of sympathy, not much to be depended on when any vigorous exertion is required. For this charge there

may be some foundation; yet it must, at the same time, be considered, that the age in which these compositsons have been most read and admired, has also been, beyond any other, the age of active benevolence. It seems natural, therefore, to suppose, that they have at least exerted no unfavourable influence. This virtue seems to be the genuine fruit of sensibility, a disposition which they have an evident tendency to cultivate. At the same time, they must be allowed to have given it some very erroneous directions, which it may be proper briefly to notice.

Too much of this sensibility seems to have been lavished on the inanimate and irrational part of the creation. This, to a certain degree, is both natural and amiable. Inanimate objects excite often the liveliest emotions, by reminding us of former scenes of friendship and happiness. The brute creation too, being capable of enjoyment and suffering, has a claim on man for humanity, and even for some share of attachment. But it is no doubt preposterous, that these should become the principal objects of his affection,

to the exclusion of such as have a more true and natural claim to it. Sterne is accused by Lord Orford of having paid more regard to a dead ass than to a living mother; and somewhat of this tendency may be discovered in most of those writers which have been formed after his model.

The votary of sentiment is also often found to bestow too great a share of his benevolence on himself. There is a selfish, as well as a social sensibility; and, when this is the case, we cannot wonder that the former should sometimes predominate. It is fostered by that minute attention to his own feelings, which forms one of his favourite employments. The idea also of having powers of perception denied to others, must naturally tend to make him become a great person in his own eyes.

This habit of mind, indeed, of itself, places a certain distance between him and the rest of mankind. He finds few with whom he can enter into free and intimate communication. He is hurt by expressions and actions, which proceeded from no bad

intention, and would not have produced the same effect on any other person. This is a danger, indeed, attendant on every species of superior refinement, either in sentiment or manners. It might appear too much to require the possessor of this superiority to resign it, with the mere view of placing himself on a level with the generality of mankind. But he ought to guard carefully against being led by it into any misinterpretation of the conduct of others; and where an action is done without any design of giving offence, to make allowance for any want of delicacy in the manner of doing it.

Another advantage to be derived from this mode of writing, is that of promoting purity of mind, of opening sources of elegant pleasure, and inspiring disgust for coarse and degrading indulgencies. That this is its natural effect can hardly, I think, be disputed. It has been represented even as tending to produce it in too great a degree; though, I confess, there does not appear to me much to be apprehended from

this quarter. A more serious objection is drawn from the opposite habits in which some writers of this description have indulged. We can never sufficiently reprobate a practice, which thus tends to counteract the natural influence of refinement in purifying the manners. But I think it evident that sentiment is here, by a forced and unnatural association, made to throw a veil over what is completely contrary to its own nature. This fault has, accordingly, been avoided, by all those writers who, to genius, have united a correct and elegant taste.

This taste of mind seems also to be congenial with the finest devotional feelings. Of this a beautiful illustration is given by Mackenzie, in the story of La Roche.

Such being the advantages which may be derived from these writings, their demerits, a more painful subject, come next under review; and these must be allowed not to be of a trivial nature. For while feeling is thus refined, even to a feverish excess, other powers, whose cultivation is no less essential to human happiness,

are suffered to lie waste. Our judgment here is to be formed chiefly from what we observe in those characters which are drawn as models of the most refined sensibility. Now these do not in general seem to take much delight in the exercise of their intellectual faculties. This is an operation in which we rarely find them engaged, and commonly, indeed, stigmatized as frigid and unfeeling. Their judgments are formed generally at once, by a sort of intuition. The continual agitation of their feelings, and that desultory mode of thinking, in which they delight, form habits the very reverse of those which lead to the discovery of truth. In general, their only test of the soundness of opinions is the impression which these happen to make upon their feelings. Yet, though thus slightly formed, they are adhered to more tenaciously, than if they had been the fruit of the longest and most profound meditation. Should any ordinary friend attempt to oppose argument to these convictions, his observations are generally received with con-

tempt, as indicating the absence of all sensibility and refinement.

This mode of writing has also insinuated itself where it might least be expected, into some of the philosophical productions of the age. To a certain extent, it may prove an ornament, and may have the effect of rendering them more agreeable and attractive. But where it becomes the predominant feature, it commonly gives birth to fantastic and visionary theories, which serve no purpose but that of misleading the mind of the reader.

Nor are the persons above alluded to more inclined to the exercise of their active than of their rational powers. Sensation, not action, is their natural state. They are governed chiefly by occasional and transient impulses, and incapable of that regular and consistent system of conduct which can alone render a man respectable and useful. They are too open to impression, too easily and quickly moved, like the reed shaken by every breeze. An unfitness for the affairs of common life, indeed, is assumed, and even

boasted of, as one of their peculiar characteristics. If this be an excellence, it is one to which they have an undoubted claim. And when we consider that action is not only indipensable, but that its due regulation may be justly regarded as the prime constituent of human excellence, this must certainly appear to be a very serious objection.

I would, by no means, however, be understood to insinuate, that feeling cannot be cultivated and refined without injury to the intellectual and active powers. The particulars that deserve to be approved of in this habit of mind, are probably capable of being separated from the attendant defects. These last seem to arise only from its taking an erroneous direction, or gaining too great an ascendency. At the same time, these defects are certainly to be found more or less in these writings which receive the name of sentimental; a circumstance which should put the reader on his guard against a too liberal indulgence in them.

STERNE.

Having finished this discussion, which has extended to an unexpected length, we proceen now to notice some of those who have excelled most in this kind of writing. And here, of course, we begin with Sterne. Yet of an author concerning whom so much has been said, it is difficult to say any thing new, and still more to say any thing that will give general satisfaction. That his writings abound with passages of the most exquisite interest will never be denied by any one qualified to understand or appreciate them. Originality he possesses in an eminent degree, being the creator of a mode of writing almost wholly his own. The way had no doubt been prepared by the degree of refinement to which the age had previously attained. But his being the first to strike out this new path evinces an uncommon strength of genius.

He is distinguished also by wit, and by a very intimate knowledge of human nature.

The former, indeed, has been shewn, in many instances, not to be genuine, but collected from out of certain obsolete and long forgotton performances.* Nor is he very delicate in his choice. A great proportion of Tristram Shandy, in particular, is filled with the lowest and most disgusting buffoonery. It seems not an improbable conjecture, that the feeling and pathetic passages only are the natural product of his own mind, and the rest introduced with the view of suiting his work to the taste of a number of readers, who would have been insensible to more refined beauties.

The Sentimental journey bears marks of an improved taste, and is nearly free from this kind of dross. Its example seems to shew, that sentiment may be grafted, with at least equal advantage, upon real, as upon imaginary, incidents.

Of the tendency of Sterne's writings, it is needless to say much, as most of the above observations will be found to apply to them.

* Ferriar's Illustrations of Sterne.

Indecency is a fault peculiar to himself, and in which he has been followed by few of his successors. This propensity appears chiefly in those parts where he aims at wit. It seems to be a fault for which Sterne is individually accountable, and not to have any natural connection with that mode of writing of which he was the author.

MACKENZIE.

We frequently find, in poetry, that a writer of great and irregular genius is succeeded by another, distinguished by correct and elegant taste. This is strikingly exemplified in Homer and Virgil, Dryden and Pope. A relation somewhat similar seems to exist between Mackenzie and Sterne. The former, coming later, has not of course the same claim to originality, but is certainly preferable in point of taste and selection. If he be inferior to Sterne in wit and in knowledge of the human heart, in pathetic powers he is fully his equal. He excels particularly in minute imagery, and the affecting detail

of little incidents. Nor is his manner of writing quite so rambling and irregular. The narratives, which are carried on in a regular and connected manner, are, I think, those in which he succeeds most completely. We may notice in particular the stories of Atkins and Monfort, in the Man of Feeling, and of La Roche and Venoni, in the Mirror.

This writer is honourably distinguished by the avoiding of every thing offensive to purity and morality, and by an uniform adherence to the cause of virtue and religion. The feelings introduced are almost always correct and amiable. There is only one point of view in which the tendency of his writings may perhaps be objected to. They seem to contain something peculiarly enervating and unfavourable to active exertion. That interesting languor, which breathes throughout, prompts rather to an indulgence in, what may be termed, the luxury of musing, than to the discharge of the duties of active life.

This mode of writing was, in Britain, evidently the result of a highly refined and polished state of society. It is remarkable, however, that it has since been a favourite one with other nations, at the first opening of their literary career. Of this several instances might be adduced; but none can be more striking than that which is afforded by Germany. Sentiment, which was here confined to a comparatively small number, seems there to have spread through the whole nation, with a degree of enthusiasm of which we have no conception. It is not, however, preserved altogether in its original purity, but is mingled with a large infusion of barbarism. The effects of this mixture have been noticed in the general observations formerly made upon German writers. Out of these, my subject now leads me to select Goethé, the well known author of the Sorrows of Werter. The rival of Schiller in dramatic performances, he is less daring and

sublime, but seems to be superior in pathos and beauty of genius. His extravagance, too, does not go to such a height, though he retains still a very ample share. He differs in several respects also from his English models. His stile does not possess the same elegance and delicacy, but is rather distinguished by force, vehemence, and even wildness. He does not seem to delight, like them, in minute observations upon human nature, but discovers more of a poetical cast, and a livelier sensibility to the beauties of nature. Nor does he shew any of that gay and playful disposition, in which they frequently indulge; but is deeply serious and melancholy throughout.

Of the tendency of this work, it is impossible to speak in terms of approbation. It is free, indeed, from the indecency of Sterne, nor does it, like some other German productions, contain any direct attack upon moral or religious principle. As to the grand objection of its encouraging suicide, this may not appear an example which is likely to meet with many imitators. Yet as there

are certainly situations which expose men to some temptation of this kind, it may doubtless be productive of occasional bad consequences. More danger, however, is, in my opinion, to be apprehended from the example which it sets of ungovernable passion, impatience of restraint, and contempt for all rational and consistent plans of conduct. Nor is there much display of benevolence in any part, either of the conduct or sentiments of the hero. His sensibility, however exquisite and beautiful, is chiefly engrossed, either by himself, or by the object of that unbounded passion, which seems to have absorbed entirely all his faculties.

There are, no doubt, many compositions of great merit, which have not been included in this enumeration. But it has probably extended to as great a length as the nature of the subject required. Where this, too, did not seem indispensably to demand it, the introduction of living authors has been generally avoided. What has been said may be sufficient to illustrate the mode of judg-

ing that has been adopted; which, if the reader approves, he may easily apply to any other work, on which he is desirous of forming an opinion.

NOTES.

Note [A] referred to in page 9.

These may perhaps be justified, even supposing us to form an unfavourable opinion of this mode of writing in general. The works, against which they are directed, were written with great ability, and were addressed to a class of readers, who would not have attended to any other mode of refutation. It became necessary, therefore, to combat them with their own weapons, without inquiring very minutely how far those weapons were lawful.

Note [B] referred to in page 20.

I am happy to observe, that the opinion here advanced, appears to coincide nearly with that of the three moſt distinguished critics of the laſt age. Of this the reader may become sensible by perusing the following quotations. In producing them, my intention, certainly, is not to rest its proof upon any authority, however eminent. But they

may be of use in obviating any prejudices that exist against it; and the bringing together the opinions of three such distinguished writers on the same subject, cannot fail to assist the reader in forming a correct judgment with regard to it.

The first, which is from Lord Kaimes, gives a very profound and philosophical view of the manner in which example operates in forming the character.

'One feeling there is that merits a deliberate view, for its singularity as well as utility. Whether to call it an emotion or a passion, seems uncertain: the former it can scarce be, because it involves desire: the latter it can scarce be, because it has no object. But this feeling, and its nature, will be best understood from examples. A single act of gratitude produceth in the spectator or reader, not only love or esteem for the author, but also a separate feeling, being a vague feeling of gratitude without an object; a feeling, however, that disposes the spectator or reader to acts of gratitude, more than upon an ordinary occasion. This feeling is overlooked by writers upon ethics; but a man may be convinced of its reality, by attentively watching his own heart when he thinks warmly of any signal act of gratitude: he will be conscious of the feeling, as distinct from the esteem or admiration he has for the grateful person. The feeling is singular in the following respect, that it is accompanied with a desire to perform acts of gratitude, without having any object; though in that state, the mind, wonderfully bent on an object, neglects no opportunity to vent itself:

any act of kindness or good-will that would pass unregarded upon another occasion, is greedily seized; and the vague feeling is converted into a real passion of gratitude: in such a state, favours are returned double.

'In like manner, a courageous action produceth in a spectator the passion of admiration directed to the author: and beside this well-known passion, a separate feeling is raised in the spectator, which may be called *an emotion of courage*; because, while under its influence, he is conscious of a boldness and intrepidity beyond what is usual, and longs for proper objects upon which to exert this emotion.

Spumantemque dari, pecora inter inertia, votis
Optat aprum, aut fulvum descendere monte leonem.

Æneid. iv. 158.

Non altramente il tauro, oue l'irriti
Gelo o amor con stimoli pungenti,
Horribilmente mugge, e co' muggiti
Gli spirti in se risueglia, e l'ire ardenti:
E'l corno aguzza a i tronchi, e par ch' inuiti
Con vani colpi á la battaglia i venti.

Tasso, canto 7. st. 55.

So full of valour that they smote the air
For breathing in their faces.

Tempest, act 4. sc. 4.

'The emotions raised by music, independent of words, must be all of this nature: courage roused by martial

music performed upon instruments without a voice, cannot be directed to any object; nor can grief or pity, raised by melancholy music of the same kind, have an object.

'For another example, let us figure some grand and heroic action, highly agreeable to the spectator; beside veneration for the author, the spectator feels in himself an unusual dignity of character, which disposeth him to great and noble actions: and herein chiefly consists the extreme delight every one hath in the histories of conquerors and heroes.

'This singular feeling, which may be termed *the sympathetic emotion of virtue*, resembles, in one respect, the well-known appetites that lead to the propagation and preservation of the species. The appetites of hunger, thirst, and animal love, arise in the mind before they are directed to any object; and in no case whatever is the mind more solicitous for a proper object, than when under the influence of any of these appetites.

'The feeling I have endeavoured to unfold, may well be termed *the sympathetic emotion of virtue*; for it is raised in a spectator, or in a reader, by virtuous actions of every kind, and by no other sort. When we contemplate a virtuous action, which fails not to prompt our love for the author, our propensity at the same time, to such actions, is so much enlivened, as to become, for a time, an actual emotion. But no man hath a propensity to vice as such: on the contrary, a wicked deed disgusts him, and makes him abhor the author; and this abhorrence is a strong antidote

against vice, as long as any impression remains of the wicked action.

'In a rough road, a halt to view a fine country is refreshing; and here a delightful prospect opens upon us. It is, indeed, wonderful to observe what incitements there are to virtue in the human frame: justice is perceived to be our duty; and it is guarded by natural punishments, from which the guilty never escape: to perform noble and generous actions, a warm sense of their dignity and superior excellence is a most efficacious incitement.* And to leave virtue in no quarter unsupported, here is unfolded an admirable contrivance, by which good example commands the heart, and adds to virtue the force of habit. We approve every virtuous action, and bestow our affection on the author; but if virtuous actions produced no other effect upon us, good example would not have great influence; the sympathetic emotion under consideration bestows upon good example the utmost influence, by prompting us to imitate what we admire. This singular emotion will readily find an object to exert itself upon; and, at any rate, it never exists without producing some effect; because virtuous emotions of that sort, are, in some degree, an exercise of virtue; they are a mental exercise at least, if they appear not externally. And every exercise of virtue, internal and external, leads to habit; for a disposition or propensity of the mind, like a

* See Essays on morality and Natural Religion, Part 1. essay ii. ch. 4.

limb of the body becomes stronger by exercise. Proper means, at the same time, being ever at hand to raise this sympathetic emotion, its frequent reiteration may, in a good measure, supply the want of a more complete exercise. Thus, by proper discipline, every person may acquire a settled habit of virtue: intercourse with men of worth, histories of generous and disinterested actions, and frequent meditation upon them, keep the sympathetic emotion in constant exercise, which, by degrees, introduceth a habit, and confirms the authority of virtue. With respect to education in particular, what a spacious and commodious avenue to the heart of a young person is here opened!' *Elements of Criticism*, chap. ii. sect. 4.

In another passage, he applies this doctrine to fiction.

'Having assigned the means by which fiction commands our passions, what only remains for accomplishing our present task, is to assign the final cause. I have already mentioned, that fiction, by means of language, has the command of our sympathy for the good of others. By the same means our sympathy may also be raised for our own good. In the fourth section of the present chapter, it is observed, that examples both of virtue and of vice raise virtuous emotions; which becoming stronger by exercise, tend to make us virtuous by habit, as well as by principle. I now further observe, that examples confined to real events are not so frequent, as without other means, to produce a habit of virtue: if they be, they are not recorded by historians. It therefore shews great wisdom, to form us in such a manner, as to be susceptible of the same im-

provement from fable that we receive from genuine history. By that contrivance, examples to improve us in virtue may be multiplied without end; no other sort of discipline contributes more to make virtue habitual, and no other sort is so agreeable in the application.'

The next shall be from Johnson:

'These familiar histories may perhaps be made of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality, and convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions. But if the power of example is so great, as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects.

'The chief advantages which these fictions have over real life is, that their authors are at liberty, though not to invent, yet to select objects, and to call from the mass of mankind those individuals upon which the attention ought most to be employed; as a diamond, though it cannot be made, may be polished by art, and placed in such a situation, as to display that lustre which before was buried among common stones.

'It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art, to imitate nature; but it it necessary to distinguish those parts of nature which are most proper for imitation: greater care is still required in representing life, which is

so often discoloured by passion, or deformed by wickedness. If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account; or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind, as upon a mirror which shews all that presents itself without discrimination.

'It is therefore not a sufficient vindication of a character, that it is drawn as it appears; for many characters ought never to be drawn; nor of a narrative, that the train of events is agreeable to observation and experience; for that observation which is called knowledge of the world, will be found much more frequently to make men cunning than good. The purpose of these writings is, surely, not only to shew mankind, but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with the less hazard; to teach the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by treachery for innocence, without infusing any wish for that superiority with which the betrayer flatters his vanity; to give the power of counteracting fraud without the temptation to practise it; to initiate youth by mock encounters in the art of necessary defence, and to increase prudence without impairing virtue.

'Many writers, for the sake of following nature, so mingle good and bad qualities in their principal personages, that they are both principally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their adventures with delight, and are led by degrees to interest ourselves in their favour, we lose the abhorrence of their faults, because they do not hinder our pleasure, or, perhaps, regard them with some kindness, for being united with so much merit.

'There have been men indeed splendidly wicked, whose endowments threw a brightness on their crimes, and whom scarce any villainy made perfectly detestable, because they could never be wholly divested of their excellencies: but such have been in all ages the great corrupters of the world; and their remembrance ought no more to be preserved, than the art of murdering without pain.

'Some have advanced, without due attention to the consequences of this notion, that certain virtues have their correspondent faults, and therefore to exhibit either a-part is to deviate from probability. Thus men are observed by *Swift* to be grateful in the same degree as they are resentful. This principle, with others of the same kind, supposes man to act from a brute impulse, and pursue a certain degree of inclination, without any choice of the object: for, otherwise, though it should be allowed that gratitude and resentment arise from the same constitution of the passions, it follows not that they will be equally indulged, when reason is consulted; and unless that consequence be admitted, this sagacious maxim becomes an empty sound, without any relation to practice or to life.

'Nor is it evident that even the first motions to these effects are always in the same proportion; for pride, which produces quickness of resentment, will frequently obstruct gratitude, by an unwillingness to admit that inferiority which obligation necessarily implies; and it is surely very unlikely, that he who cannot think he receives a favour, will ever acknowledge it.

'It is of the utmost importance to mankind, that positions of this tendency should be laid open and confuted; for while men consider good and evil as springing from the same road, they will spare the one for the sake of the other; and in judging, if not of others, at least of themselves, will be apt to estimate their virtues by their vices. To this fatal error, all those will contribute, who confound the colours of right and wrong, and instead of helping to settle their boundaries, mix them with so much art, that no common mind is capable to disunite them.

'In narratives where historical veracity has no place, I cannot discover why there should not be exhibited the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability; for what we cannot credit we shall never imitate; but of the highest and purest kind that humanity can reach; which, when exercised in such trials as the various revolutions of things shall bring upon it, may, by conquering some calamities, and enduring others, teach us what we may hope, and what we can perform. Vice, for vice is necessary to be shewn, should always disgust, nor should the graces of gaiety, or the dignity of courage, be so united with it, as to reconcile it to the mind. Wherever it appears, it should raise hatred by the malignity of its practices, and contempt by the meanness of its stratagems: for while it is supported by either parts or spirit, it will be seldom heartily abhored. The *Roman* tyrant was content to be hated, if he was but feared; and there are thousands of the readers of romances willing to be thought wicked, if they may be al-

lowed to be wits. It is therefore to be always inculcated, that virtue is the highest proof of a superior understanding, and the only solid basis of greatness; and that vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts; that it begins in mistake, and ends in ignominy.'

Dr. Blair has also expressed an opinion of the utility which may be derived from this mode of writing, though he does not, perhaps, discover altogether the same discrimination as to the manner in which this may be effected.

'Fictitious histories might be employed for very useful purposes. They furnish one of the best channels for conveying instruction, for painting human life and manners, for shewing the errors into which we are betrayed by our passions, for rendering virtue amiable, and vice odious. The effect of well-contrived stories towards accomplishing these purposes, is stronger than any effect that can be produced by simple and naked instruction; and hence we find, that the wisest men in all ages have more or less employed fables and fictions, as the vehicles of knowledge. These have ever been the basis of Epic and Dramatic poetry. It is not, therefore, the nature of this sort of writing considered in itself, but the faulty manner of its execution that can expose it to any contempt.'

Note [c] referred to in page 59.

The great actions performed by the heroes of the Iliad are generally by means of extraordinary assistance from some of the powers above. A striking instance of the same thing occurs at the close of the eighth book of the Æneid, where Virgil gives a description of the battle of Actium. This, we may observe, was designed as a direct piece of flattery to Augustus. By what means then does he obtain this victory, and with it the empire of the word? Is it by some splendid and unparalleled display of wisdom and valour? No: It is Apollo, who bends his bow from on high.

Omnis eo terrore Egyptus et Indi,
Omnis Arabs, omnes vertere terga Sabei.

ON CERTAIN EFFECTS OF RHYME IN POETICAL COMPOSITION.

Rhyme is a practice which has at once been very generally adopted by the poets, and condemned by the critics, of modern times. By its enemies it has been loaded with every kind of abuse, and but feebly defended even by its warmest advocates. It is not meant to enter here into any discussion of its general merits. I shall confine myself to one charge which has been generally considered as wholly unanswerable. Rhyme is supposed to be altogether unmeaning, and to afford no pleasure but that which arises from the mere jingle of similar endings. Upon closer examination, however, we shall perhaps find, that this charge is unfounded;

and that rhyme possesses, in fact, a great variety of expression.

Lord Kaimes, so far as I know, was the first writer who took notice of the expression of rhyme. After treating, at some length, on this subject,* he concludes its natural effect to be that of giving to the verse a moderate degree of liveliness and gaiety. Mr. Stewart,† on the other hand, has observed, that it sometimes tends to produce a melancholy impression. These remarks, however opposite, appear to me to be both well-founded, and applicable to different circumstances, according to the following general law.

'Rhymes which follow each other in quick succession, inspire cheerfulness and gaiety: a great interval between them, on the contrary, tends to produce a sedate, serious, and even melancholy impression. The degree in which these effects are produced, is in proportion to the greatness or smallness of the interval.'

* Elements of Criticism, Vol. II. p. 169—176.

† Philosophy of the Human Mind, Note, p. 301. 4to edit.

1. My first example shall be one employed by Lord Kaimes.

Oh! the pleasing, pleasing anguish,
When we love, and when we languish:
Pleasure courting,
Charms transporting,
Fancy viewing,
Joys ensuing.
Oh! the pleasing, pleasing anguish.

Here the two lines at the beginning being short, and having their rhymes contiguous, tend rather to produce an enlivening effect. The very short lines succeeding, produce it in the utmost possible degree. But the last, of which the rhyme is connected with others that are very remote, causes a sudden transition to a quite opposite tone of sentiment.

2. The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Here the two rhymes, *way*, *me*, immediately following each other, and both connect-

ed with others at a considerable distance, produce, at the close, a deep impression of solemnity, which renders this stanza admirably fitted for elegiac composition.

3. In epic poetry the chief requisite is dignity, which occupies a middle place between gaiety and melancholy. The couplet used in English heroic verse, is observed by Lord Kaimes, to partake too much of the former quality Notwithstanding the length of the line, the rhymes appear still to come too close to each other. This appears particularly where sublimity is aimed at; where, by the frequency of the rhymes, the passage is split into a multitude of little divisions, which prevent any grand effect from being produced.—Thus:

This seals thy suit, and this fulfils thy vows—
He spoke, and awful bends his sable brows;
Shakes his ambrosial curls, and gives the nod,
The stamp of fate, and sanction of the God.
High heaven, with trembling, the dread signal took,
And all Olympus to the centre shook.

With this compare the following:

——————— Him the Almighty power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from the ethereal sky,
With hideous ruin and combustion, down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamantine chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms!

It was probably from a secret perception of this, that Milton was led to prefer blank verse; not merely, as Johnson supposes, because he found it easier.

4. A singular mode of obviating this disadvantage has been adopted by the Italian poets. Their stanza consists of eight lines; the six first of which rhyme to each other alternately, and the two last in succession; as in the following:—

Quivi da precursori a noi vien detto
Ch'alto d'arme havean sentito
E viste insegne, e indicii, onde han sospetto
Che sia vicino essercito infinito

Non pensier, non color, non cangia aspetto
Non muta voce il signor nostro ardito
Ben che molti vi sian ch'al fero aviso
Tingan di bianca pallidezza il viso.

Here the first six are of the nature of the elegiac, while the two concluding lines form a heroic couplet. The opposite qualities of these counteract each other, and bring the verse, on the whole, pretty nearly to a due medium. If the former composes the greater part of the stanza, the latter occupies the most conspicuous place. I doubt, however, if this variation of the rhymes have in other respects a very happy effect in narrative poetry.

5. Spencer, who formed himself rather too closely upon the Italian school, has used a stanza of nearly the same length. The disposition of the rhymes, however, is different. Though several follow each other in succession, yet none of these stand by themselves, so as to form a couplet, but have always some others with which it is connected.

This circumstance, with the alexandrine at the close, prevents them from having any enlivening effect. This structure of the stanza has, I suspect, had a great influence in occasioning that languor, which, notwithstanding the merit of the poetry, every one feels in reading the Fairy Queen.

Thomson has, with great taste, selected this stanza for his Castle of Indolence. From it I shall extract the following fine specimen.

I care not, Fortune, what you me deny;
You cannot rob me of free Nature's grace;
You cannot shut the windows of the sky,
Through which Aurora shews her brightening face.
You cannot bar my frequent foot to trace
Her lawns and groves by living stream at eve.
Let health my limbs and finer fibres brave,
And their toys to the great children leave.
Of Fancy, Reason, Virtue, nought can me bereave.

Nor can we blame the choice which Beattie has made of it for the Minstrel.

6. I cannot help wondering that Milton should have employed the same verse in two poems of so opposite a nature as the Allegro and Penseroso. That which he has chosen is rather too gay even for the Allegro, in which there is no mirth, but merely the cheerfulness of a sedate and contemplative mind. But in the Penseroso there is a decided contrast between the sentiment and the measure, of which every one must be sensible in the following passage, otherwise extremely beautiful.

Sometime walking, not unseen,
On the dry smooth-shaven green;
To behold the wand'ring moon,
Riding near her highest noon,
Like one that had been led astray,
Through the heav'n's wide pathless way;
And oft, as if her head she bow'd,
Stooping through a fleecy cloud.

It would be easy to extend these remarks to a much greater length. What has been said, however, may be sufficient to explain

the general principle, which the reader, if he chooses, will find little difficulty in applying to any other species of verse. These observations are not certainly of any great importance; yet, if well founded, they may be of some use in leading the poet to choose the measure best adapted to the nature of his subject.

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